

THE WORSHIP OF LUCIFER

A Novel

BY

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CHAPTER I.

THE HAUNTED HOUSE.

THE gate was well-nigh torn away from its rusty hinges, the wooden bars were worm-eaten, rotten, and stained, yet it endured to tell a silent tale of scorching heat, drenching rains, and nipping, biting frosts. The paling had parted company with the decayed posts, so that the gate was unnecessary, seeing that one could enter on either side of it. The fence itself was broken and split, the dingy ruined lodge untenanted, while the moss-grown, neglected carriage-drive remained like an unbeaten forest track, without the faintest mark of a wheel upon its surface to suggest life and movement. Overhead sunshine and azure sky were veiled, for the lofty sombre trees towered giant-

wise, and their branches interlaced and united to form a grand dark arch, shutting out the bright beams of day. The stillness was only broken by the cawing of the rooks, which wheeled round and round, flapping their wings. The road was long and narrow, but at length it terminated in a broad sweep, whilst the foliage became less dense; and there, a little way back in this space, literally cut out from the surrounding mass of vegetation, that spread upwards in a leafy expanse and earthwards in a wild bushy tangle, stood, or, rather, loomed, in tranquil, mysterious majesty, the gray haunted house. Defiantly did it stand, eyeing the sad, lonesome grounds from its small black-silled windows, which looked out of the uncompromisingly plain square mansion, unrelieved by porch or jutting gables; all was straight, hard, and unrelenting.

No wonder that mortals had hitherto shunned such an uninviting, dismal habitation; it were a marvel indeed should anyone desire shelter under so forbidding a roof, putting aside the fact that ghosts were said to roam and flit about within the melancholy walls. But now at last the brave man had appeared, who, having expressed his desire of becoming the happy possessor of Screeling Grange to the

astonished agents, and having signed the necessary agreement and paid the required amount by cheque, was at this moment arriving at his very own most funereal front-door.

A century had passed since a real bonâ-fide proprietor had taken up his residence at the house. Tenants there had certainly been off and on, but none had stayed more than a few months at the longest. The last inheritor, a distant connection of the unfortunate family to whom the place originally belonged, and which had died out, was delighted beyond measure at being rid of such a hateful domain. Vainly had he endeavoured to sell it for years past; even to let it had been almost an impossibility. The man could scarcely believe his ears, therefore, when he was informed that Mr. Christopher Perkyns ardently wished to relieve him of his oppressive white elephant of an heirloom. The name being so queer, he was at first inclined to imagine that the agent had played him a trick, and was amusing himself at his chief's expense. But no, indeed; he soon found that there was not the least joke in the matter. Imagine his joy! He was exultant; he sat in his comfortable easy-chair and chuckled downright.

‘What a piece of luck!’ That’s what he

thought. Then he wondered why Mr. Perkyns should have been so deluded as to saddle himself with such a blighted, ill-starred mansion and property. What in the world could be the reason? He knew naught of the admirable person, excepting that he was rich; he had made a fortune in Africa or Australia, so folks said. Well, anyhow, this Mr. Christopher Perkyns must be extremely odd and eccentric.

Thus mused the last inheritor, and let us leave him in his pleasant, cheerful mood to have a look at the new landlord of Screeling Grange. He is a massively-built man of about forty, and of middle height. His legs are, perhaps, somewhat short for his body, but they make up for want of length by thickness. The head is bullet-shaped, the hair dark, stiff, and plentiful. Small, piercing, unpleasant, coal-black eyes look out under heavy brows. The unkempt moustache and beard embellish a florid face, burnt almost to the colour of a Red Indian instead of to a dull mahogany brown by the fierce tropical sun. Thick strong arms correspond with the nether limbs. Hands and feet are big and clumsy. Put all these physical attributes neatly together, and you have the outer covering of Christopher Perkyns as he thrust the huge, unwieldy key into the keyhole

and opened his front-door, which went creaking, creaking backwards, raising meanwhile a cloud of dust, and disturbing myriads of enormous spiders, which scuttled away to hide themselves in obscure corners. The entrance hall was spacious. It was lighted by one solitary window. This dim, inefficient illumination was singularly depressing. Great shadows were thrown everywhere around. Here and there a ray of cold, white Northern daylight glinted across a figure made up of chain armour, showing that a little gentle scouring would improve its appearance; or a beam would just fall on a picture begrimed with dirt, and on a frame almost black instead of radiantly golden. The rugs on the stone floor were almost denuded of fur, moth-eaten and mildewed.

Mr. Christopher Perkyns looked pensive as he gazed upon the general dilapidation; then he smiled to himself, and said half aloud: 'Never mind, though it is worse than I thought; for I only gave a casual glance at detail. I looked at the whole, and knew immediately that it would suit me. It is certainly in a bad state—very; but it will answer my purpose perfectly.' He smiled again, showing two rows of very white teeth, and his expression was

not genial ; indeed, it was the reverse : it was malevolent.

At that moment a lumbering country conveyance drove up to the house. It was piled up with luggage, and, besides the driver, there were two occupants—an elderly man and an old woman. The man poked the coachman with his stick, and shouted gruffly :

‘ Go to the back-door, wherever that may be !’

On hearing this loud remark, Mr. Perkyns emerged from the hall, and called out in bland tones :

‘ No, no ! you can’t get in that way. Unload here, if you please. Mrs. Simcox, let me help you down ;’ and, offering his hand, he assisted the ancient dame to alight from the high vehicle.

She was a most unprepossessing person, of medium stature. Her age might have been anything between sixty and a hundred. Her face was of the colour of parchment, and a good deal wrinkled. She had an enormously long, thin, hooked nose, which, when she spoke, had an ugly trick of moving at the tip. Her eyes were of an indescribable shade of green, tinged with yellow ; they were bright with an uncanny shine, and very shifty. In fact, a cursory glance at the embodiment of such doubtful charms was

enough to cause the chance beholder to shudder involuntarily, for she was an unpleasant and wicked-looking old hag.

‘Well-a-day!’ she muttered as she walked into the hall with a remarkably nimble step for her years, ‘I don’t think much of this.’

She raised her skinny fingers to her head to settle the shabby poke-bonnet, which had become disarranged by the jolting of the cumbersome carriage, and now presented a lop-sided, somewhat tipsy appearance; then she pulled her red-and-black checked shawl tighter round her bony, meagre shoulders and shivered. It was a balmy day towards the latter end of May. Nevertheless, the interior of the house struck chill; the atmosphere was damp, and the mouldy curtains and druggets exhaled a musty, fusty, humid smell.

‘Mr. Puckle,’ she cried in a rasping voice as she turned to the door, ‘I want that there basket. If you give it to me, and I can find my way to the kitchen, I’ll see about some victuals.’

‘All right, Mrs. Simcox,’ responded her fellow-traveller of the gruff intonation.

He was a tall spare man of about fifty, curiously pale, and with diminutive light-blue eyes set very close to his cogitative nose. His mouth was determined, the lips pinched, the

jaw square and long. It was a distinctly cruel countenance. He took off his hat and mopped his brow, for the exertion of moving the luggage had warmed him unduly. The bare head thus displayed was covered with closely-cut, orange-coloured hair, with the exception of the crown, where it had undoubtedly been shaved away to form a tonsure, but was just beginning to sprout again like the down on a young duck, whilst his face was as smooth as the face of a woman.

Mr. Christopher Perkyns, who, with his hands stuck in his pockets, had hitherto been complacently watching this gentleman's operations, at this juncture offered to relieve Mr. Puckle of the hamper which was the object of Mrs. Simcox's desires, and in so doing he remarked to the heated individual :

‘Where on earth is the boy Gulliver?’

‘Gulliver preferred to walk from the station, or, rather, run, as he termed it. He said that a porter had told him of a short-cut across the fields,’ answered Mr. Puckle in his rough voice; but his speech was that of a cultivated, well-educated person.

‘He is a tiresome urchin. I hope you will keep him in order, Puckle, or he will get out of hand altogether.’

‘I will do my best,’ returned the other; ‘but, had you taken my advice, you would have engaged a girl instead. Servant-maids are so much easier to tackle.’

‘Perhaps you are right; but women are so deuced inquisitive and prying,’ said Mr. Perkyns.

‘Not if you get a regular country fool,’ retorted Puckle.

The owner of Screeling Grange vouchsafed no further reply. He simply shrugged his broad shoulders and strode into the house, bearing the basket in his strong arms.

‘If you will follow me, Mrs. Simcox, I will show you the kitchen and your room,’ he remarked to the old woman, who stood in the centre of the vestibule with her eyes fixed upon the ceiling and a scornful smile playing about her lips.

‘Thank you, sir,’ she replied, with a cringing, servile demeanour as she followed her master.

They passed through a door and down a long, drear, cold stone passage. The floor was filthy, and the same might be said of the kitchen, which was soon reached, for it was literally bestrewn with the carcasses of black-beetles, which had presumably perished for want of food of any kind.

'Mercy, oh!' exclaimed Mrs. Simcox when this disgusting sight met her eyes. 'I never did! I must scrub this down to-night, master; 'tain't appetizing. Where are the pots and pans, sir?' she added crossly, as she surveyed the black, smoke-stained bare walls.

'Now, look here, Mrs. Simcox,' began Mr. Perkyns, less suavely than usual, and contracting his brows: 'you knew what you had to expect, for I disguised nothing from you; therefore,' he continued with decision, 'if you are going to be too grand and particular, we shan't suit each other—you comprehend?'

He regarded her fixedly as he spoke.

Mrs. Simcox's tone and manner immediately changed, as if by magic. She coughed and cleared her husky voice.

'Of course, sir! certainly, sir!' she said with an ingratiating leer, and dropping a curtsy; 'only, if I may be so bold, sir, you as has been accustomed to live like a fighting cock'—then she suddenly pulled herself up: 'I beg pardon, sir, like a prince, I should say by rights—you would fancy dishes that are tasty and nice, sir. Not that you are faddish—by no means whatsomedever, sir; and if you please, sir, if I ain't got no proper stewpans and such-like—well, all as I says is that the food won't

come up select, by no means.' She curtsied again.

Mr. Perkyns paid no attention to this discourse ; he had turned his back upon the old person, and was busily engaged in forcing open the doors of a cupboard, which had stuck. Presently, after some few vigorous shakes and pulls, he succeeded in his task.

' Pray will you be so good as to examine the contents of this ?' he remarked, glancing over his shoulder, whilst in his tone was a mixture of triumph and contemptuous sarcasm. ' Here you will find all you require.'

' To be sure !' returned the ancient one, as at her master's call she quickly joined him, poking her long nose into the unsavoury cupboard. In her efforts to peer into the depths of murky dustiness, her long nasal organ dislodged a fearful creature, almost as large as a tarantula, and cobwebs encircled her uncanny visage, causing her to resemble a witch more than ever ; but, nothing daunted, she continued her researches with zeal and undisturbed composure. ' They will do first-rate !' she observed, as she dragged, or rather clawed, out a few battered pots, a kettle and a frying-pan. ' Ah, plates, dishes, knives, spoons, forks, tumblers, and a rolling-pin—tea-things too !' she enu-

merated with glistening cat's eyes, as she viewed the cracked unwashed china and lustreless articles in Britannia metal. She placed the things on the rickety, dirt-begrimed table, and, putting her arms akimbo, grinned up at Mr. Perkyns with an air of contentment, in which lay a characteristic tinge of latent low cunning and spiteful malice, which might easily be fanned into a flame, that would break out and flare upwards right merrily at the least provocation.

It was clear that neither good-humour nor contentment was the normal condition of Mrs. Simcox ; the lines of her countenance did not betray the possession of these delightful qualities, which tend to make life so pleasant ; in fact, that tell-tale feature, the mouth, revealed to an acute observer some little phases of character which its owner might have preferred to keep secret. Cruelty, not kindness, was forcibly and indelibly stamped upon it, unscrupulousness also, and other ugly faults ; the whole visage was hard, worldly and calculating. To express a gentle, sympathetic or compassionate feeling by means of such a physiognomy must have been passing difficult, if the heart were sensible of an emotion of the kind, seeing that that cold, sinful heart usually worked on the

telegraphic wires of the vices, and not on those of the virtues ; an unused set of wires would surely be difficult to manage at the outset, and it might require a Herculean effort to put them in motion at all.

But to return to the subject of this moralizing. Perceiving that her master remained silent, she hazarded a remark : ' Beautiful they are, sir—second-hand, if I may make so bold as to say so ; they ain't new, I mean, but, gracious, oh ! that don't matter by no means.'

' I am glad you are satisfied,' responded Mr. Christopher Perkyns carelessly, and appearing slightly bored at being compelled to descend to such trivialities. ' Anyhow, they will have to do, like everything else in this house : come upstairs and see your room.'

So saying, he marched out of the kitchen, picking his steps as he went, to avoid treading upon more nasty defunct animalculæ than was absolutely necessary.

Mrs. Simcox was not so squeamish ; she stumped after her master at a respectful distance, caring not at all where her flat feet placed themselves. They mounted the ill-lighted, corkscrewy back-staircase and ascended to the top floor, where were situated five good-sized attics.

'You can take your choice, Mrs. Simcox,' said Mr. Perkyns, as he opened one door after the other; 'they are all furnished, I believe,' he added.

His companion entered each in turn. They were by no means inviting. There were certainly beds of a sort, and chairs, chests of drawers, also smudged or damaged mirrors; the paper was hanging on the walls in shreds, the carpets were in holes. Mrs. Simcox looked unutterable things, but she probably thought it would be wiser to hold her tongue. Mr. Perkyns was gazing at her in order to discover her impressions. Having made the tour of inspection, she returned to the first room she had entered; its condition was a trifle better than that of the rest; besides, it was larger.

'If it is all the same to you, sir, I will have this one, if you please; but——' She hesitated.

'What is it?' queried Mr. Perkyns.

'Am I to sleep up here all alone, no one as a neighbour? Rather ghostly like it is, sir, begging your pardon,' she said.

Christopher laughed.

'Now, why in the world should you be afraid of ghosts, Mrs. Simcox? I hardly imagine they would interfere with you—I don't indeed;' and he laughed again. 'No, really you are

diverting. Don't be alarmed ; I feel positively certain that spooks will never intrude themselves as guests upon your privacy.—Demons might perhaps, though, the hideous old hag !' he muttered to himself. ' Look here,' he continued aloud, as the ancient dame fixed her eyes upon him inquiringly : ' You shall have the boy Gulliver next door ; then you need not alarm yourself : no disembodied spirit would venture in that mischievous urchin's proximity.'

' Thank you kindly, sir ; I really don't believe as they would ; any ways, Gulliver will be a safeguard, the rascal !' And the old lady grinned and chuckled.

' We will go down to the lower floors, if you are ready,' observed Mr. Perkyns. ' Here are my apartments, also Mr. Puckle's,' he said, as they halted in the corridor beneath. ' You notice,' he continued, as they paced slowly through the different chambers, ' how they open out of one another ; but I intend to keep the connecting doors locked and bolted, so, you see, I am in no fear of bogies.'

Christopher thought that it would be particularly tiresome and annoying if his domestic became scared ; for, should she give warning, it might be difficult to replace her, for the Grange had a bad name in the neighbourhood,

owing to the mysterious hauntings which were said to disturb its interior ; and he considered that even a servant engaged from afar, a complete stranger in those parts, would very possibly take herself off again immediately, if she saw or heard anything unusual, or fancied either the seeing or hearing.

‘ I beg your pardon, sir,’ broke in Mrs. Simcox, interrupting her employer’s musings. ‘ I beg your pardon, sir,’ she repeated, ‘ but do you believe, in your own mind, that ghosts walk ? Of course, we all knows that this place is given out to be persecuted by such-like.’ She seemed as if she would read Mr. Perkyns’ thoughts : her neck was craned forward, her wrinkled lips apart, the horrid eyes dilated and staring at him.

‘ Best think about your cooking and cleaning ; then you will have no time to worry yourself about such nonsense,’ he replied coldly, as he gave her a contemptuous, disgusted glance. ‘ People will say anything, especially when a house has long remained empty ; persons can imagine all kinds of things, too, if they have no wisdom to guide them. If you choose to be foolish, for instance, you will be deluded by your own senses. But enough of this. See that the beds are aired, I beg.’ He pointed

towards a gloomy four-poster hung round with dark maroon rep curtains as he spoke.

'You are very learned, sir. Oh, ah, sir; certainly I will put the bedding before the kitchen fire,' responded Mrs. Simcox.

It was indeed wonderful that Mr. Christopher Perkyns should have decided to take up his abode in such a ramshackle, dingy residence. The bedrooms, besides, were enough to strike terror into the souls of the hardiest and bravest. The whole furniture was in black oak; the windows were extremely small, and draped with dark hangings. The effect was most depressing, yet the new owner did not appear to trouble himself about the universal gloom; on the contrary, rather did he seem to revel in it.

He looked smilingly around; his smile was odd; a certain sinister defiance lurked therein. Without uttering another word, he descended, followed by his satellite, to the ground-floor by a fairly-wide front-staircase. Here all was as sombre as above. The drawing-room looked bleak and bare. All was stiff, precise, and harsh — no cosy corners, no delicious easy-chairs. Even the sofa was hard, and of forbidding aspect. It possessed two wooden arms, of the darkest mahogany. They curved round in an angular way, and reminded one forcibly

of the awful members of the notorious Iron Maiden, stretched out ready to close with a hateful grip upon some wretched victim. Peacocks' feathers were arranged in black-and-gold china vases on the mantelpiece. Not a flower, not a plant, was to be seen. There was no timepiece, even, to tick pleasantly, and so give some sign of life. The upholstery was heavy, faded, and sad of hue. The dining-room was the same. Everything was ponderous. The leather on the furniture was worn and rubbed. A general dimness prevailed as of deep twilight, yet it was but four o'clock, and the afternoon was fine.

'It's a splendid house, sir, if I may take the liberty of saying so,' remarked Mrs. Simcox, lost in admiration of the comparative vastness and of the vanishing, or, indeed, vanished, glory of the decorations; for the satins, tapestries, and wall-papers were at their last gasp, and one could hardly tell if the tables had ever been polished, such was their present condition.

'You will find plenty of work in repairing and sweeping,' said Mr. Perkyns, without deigning to notice her flattering observation. 'There are two rooms, however, which I beg you will spare in your energetic spring-cleaning, or whatever you call it,' he added, with a search-

ing look ; ' they are my study and a small room adjoining it. You need never enter them, you understand.' He spoke with firmness. ' I shall attend to them myself, or, rather, Mr. Puckle, who delights in dusting, will do so for me. At this moment they are being prepared for me by workmen.'

Whilst delivering himself of these remarks, Christopher had been conducting Mrs. Simcox up a small spiral staircase which led only to the apartments about which he had been speaking.

' See !' he exclaimed, and, narrowly watching his companion's face, he ushered her into a good-sized chamber, in which two persons, a man and a lad, were occupied in draping the walls with black cloth.

The floor was of dark-stained oak, and scrupulously clean ; the ceiling was painted, and when the astounded housekeeper raised her eyes to it, she uttered a faint scream.

' Mercy, oh ! why, it's hell, I do believe !' she cried, panic-stricken. ' Sir, what a dreadful picture !'

' Do you think so ?' returned Mr. Perkyns calmly, as he surveyed it with evident satisfaction.

The design was decidedly horrible. On a background of lurid flames and smoke was a

round globe ; the fiery tongues shot below and around it, and above, with his feet just resting upon this sphere, which was of azure blue, there stood a mighty angel, clad in a robe of the deepest scarlet, on which were curious black hieroglyphics, and round his waist was twined a sheeny green serpent, with cruel fangs and evil eyes. It was lifelike, real ; the artist must have been a genius. The angel's wings were gray, and widely extended on either side ; the countenance was wicked beyond description ; devilish malignity was written upon every feature. The hair surrounded the head like a swarthy mane, and on the brow reposed a circlet of pointed, darting, quivering flames, which seemed to cast an awful reflection in the murky, nebulous atmosphere which loomed in the upper part of the painting.

‘ Why do you start ? ’ asked Christopher of the old woman. ‘ Does the subject not please you ? Truly, the fire is meant to represent hell ; the globe is our earth, which is suspended immediately over it ; and poised upon the world is Lucifer, Prince of Darkness. Surely it is rather a quaint conceit ! ’

Mrs. Simcox trembled like an aspen leaf.

‘ Oh my ! I can't abear to look at it no more ; it upsets me, it do. I never see such a fearful

thing in all my born days. Sir, if I was you, begging your pardon humbly, I shouldn't choose this as a private sitting-room ; some harm may befall you through it, sir.'

'Your silly remarks and your extraordinary timorousness are alike the result of ignorance,' replied Mr. Perkyns sententiously ; 'but, as I have already said, you need never put your foot over this threshold ; indeed, my wish is a command, if you please. I should, however, just like you to come into the other room also, as you are here.'

So saying, he walked to the further end of the black study, and pushed against a door which evidently fastened with a spring from the inside.

'Wait a moment ; all right,' was uttered in a gruff voice from beyond, and then the door flew swiftly back, revealing the figure of Mr. Edmund Puckle, who leisurely retreated, seating himself upon an inverted bucket, which he had doubtlessly just vacated, for he observed :

'Necessity is the mother of invention ; failing a chair, you perceive my curious makeshift. I came here to see how they were getting on with the painting ; what is your opinion, Mrs. Simcox, pray ?' and he sucked the knob of his walking-stick.

The old lady had crept after her master in

terror-stricken amazement, mingled with natural feminine curiosity. She remained silent, dumfounded. The small apartment into which the two now entered resembled a scarlet-lined box with crape trimmings, for ceiling, walls, and floor were of that glaring colour, with the exception of a dense sable velvet *portière*, which was suspended from an iron rod, so that about a quarter of the length of the room might be concealed and hidden when this pall-like curtain was drawn. At present it was pulled aside, and behind it a painter was industriously working high up on the wall. He had just finished the outlines of a hideous white skull, and was commencing the cross-bones ; below him stood a carpenter, who was engaged in fixing up a wooden structure in the shape of a table or altar ; a long thick roll of black crape lay beside him for decorative purposes. He turned to Mr. Perkyns, and inquired deferentially if he might be given a few instructions a little later, as 'this was a new line of business, and he hardly understood what was expected of him, never having been called to undertake anything of the exact kind previously.'

'This gentleman can instruct you still better than I can,' responded Christopher, indicating Mr. Puckle as he spoke.

‘Yes ; if you leave it in my hands, I will have it satisfactorily carried out,’ said Edmund quietly ; ‘it will be ready in two days,’ he continued, giving the other a meaning look.

‘The sooner the better,’ answered Mr. Perkyns with a grim smile ; ‘so, good friend, I will not disturb you. Join me in the dining-room in half an hour ; you will need some refreshment.’

At length Mrs. Simcox found her voice.

‘Trust me never to come in here no more, sir. Oh, my patience ! I can’t say as how I am on my head or my heels. I didn’t think for to behold such fearsome things ; a clever gentleman, an’ I know as you are, sir, but it beats me to think as howsomedever you want them pictures and funeral-like arrangements to help your learned studies. Oh my, oh !’ and, entirely forgetful of her manners, she brushed past her master, and, hurrying out into the hall, scudded along as fast as her legs would carry her down the steps and along the stone passage to the kitchen, like a rabbit returning to its warren.

‘I don’t think she will trouble us,’ whispered Mr. Perkyns to Edmund Puckle.

‘No ; so it seems,’ returned the other in lowered tones. ‘Best so ; scare ’em all at once,’

he added. 'Gulliver doesn't want to come here again, either ; I had him in, too.'

Both men laughed softly.

'Ta-ta,' said Christopher; 'I am going to unpack.' And he strode off briskly.

CHAPTER II.

THE PRIEST.

It may be well here to explain in what relationship Mr. Edmund Puckle stood towards the new owner of Screeling Grange ; servant he certainly was not, yet he appeared to be a sort of dependent, or else why did he occupy himself in unloading the vehicle, whilst Christopher calmly looked on ? In the first place, then, it must be stated that Mr. Perkyns was hardly what one would term a gentleman to the backbone. Rather was he a 'commonish gentleman.' His father had amassed a good fortune by keeping a fashionable hotel on the South Coast, and he himself had very much increased the pile bequeathed to him by a little successful gold-mining in South Africa ; diamonds also had he been fortunate enough to come upon, so that he was now 'a very warm man.' He had received a good education, but

he had been unaccustomed to mix with persons of refinement. His father had been a swaggering man, with a very good head for business, although self-taught and of scant knowledge; his mother was an inferior, vulgar woman, whose aspirations did not soar above tawdry finery and imitation jewellery, her one idea being to ape her betters, and pass for a great lady, which not particularly elevated aim she failed utterly to accomplish. Common snobbish vulgarity was therefore born and bred in Christopher, and would have been difficult to eradicate. He was naturally clever, but he had not used his gifts very worthily. He was not particularly scrupulous or over-nice; if he could take a mean advantage, he would not falter in the least before reaching out his hand. His conscience was not tender; it had become a little tired of reproaching him. He possessed an insinuating manner when he chose to exert it, and so make friends; but when a man discovered Christopher's true nature, he usually, if he was of average probity, parted from him—if not immediately, then gradually.

Christopher despised women; he looked upon them as toys and conveniences—he was essentially material. He had never yet come across a good and attractive woman to stir his sluggish

soul and awaken the nobler part of his nature ; those he had met were, if good, either painfully plain or hopelessly dull. He had therefore preferred to associate with the frail and fair, who amused him, and thus allowed himself to drift down lower and lower towards the plane of utter animalism ; so he continued to sink.

But there was an odd trait in the man's character : he was very superstitious ; not religious, by any means—that is a different thing altogether. He believed in omens and spells, incantations, and in the nether world, with a reigning spirit of darkness, although he never raised his grovelling soul heavenwards.

It came about that in his travels—in fact, it was when journeying by the express train from Dover to London—he made the acquaintance of Mr. Edmund Puckle, with whom he soon discovered that he had a great bond of union : for in the course of conversation it transpired that Father Puckle, for so he was then, was just returning from a mission to Paris, where he had been sent by the spiritual directors of the Roman Catholic Church in England, to investigate the proceedings of a certain sect styled the Luciferians. If the Father was bound to secrecy, he did not keep his vow, for he enlightened Christopher as to the manner of

the rites which he had been fortunate enough to witness. He was not a right-minded priest, an honourable, true son of the Church, but a black sheep—a wolf indeed in the fold. He informed his companion that he was sick to death of the life he was leading, for which he had no vocation. He said he felt he had no call towards higher things, neither could he steadfastly believe in all the doctrines. Moreover, they did not please him, and now that he had been admitted to view a service in honour of Lucifer, he felt an intense leaning to that occult mode of worship. He declared that Satan had made himself visible, and that he had been unable to refrain from prostrating himself before the Prince of Darkness, and that on rising from his knees a whisper had been breathed into his ear which caused his brain to reel. The words were: 'Serve me; I rule the world more and more; leave the Cross, and wear my fiery crown of earthly joy, for even now I reign in your mortal soul.'

Then Christopher, whose interest had become roused to boiling-point, and who himself held and revelled in the terrible notion that he was under the dominion of the devil, and that everything in this world that was worth the having or the plucking came direct from that awful

being and from his burning, scorching realm, begged the priest to cast in his lot with him if he meditated leaving his Church. After some consideration Father Puckle consented to do this, and as soon as he had sent in his resignation he joined his new friend.

It was at once decided that they should begin the Luciferian Cult on their own account, and for this purpose Mr. Perkyns bought Screeling Grange. Edmund Puckle had not a penny in the world; the few pence which were originally in his possession he had given to the Church when he entered the priesthood, so that he left as a pauper. For this reason Christopher, who was not ultra-refined, lorded it over him. The ex-priest belonged to one of the oldest families in the North of England, and it was sometimes a little galling to his feelings to be treated almost as if he were an underling. However, as he had no one in the world to care for him, no near relations, no one to offer him a home, he swallowed his pride, and telling himself with some sense that the advantages of his position with Christopher entirely counterbalanced the small disagreeables, he cheerfully performed any service that Mr. Perkyns or the moment demanded.

The ancient Mrs. Simcox looked down upon

him ; of that fact he was perfectly aware. She placed him in the same category as herself, and considered him 'a menial'; she occasionally omitted to address him as 'sir,' and he had once overheard her speaking of him to Gulliver as 'that man Puckle.' Then there were small slights, which, nothing in themselves, yet clearly informed him that 'he did not count for much' in the housekeeper's estimation. His bed would constantly remain unmade and his room in disorder until late in the afternoon, whereas the apartment of Mr. Perkyns was tidied up immediately after his breakfast. Even Master Gulliver would manifest a certain contempt for him ; more than once had Mr. Puckle's boots been left untouched by brush or blacking, and if he remonstrated, the lazy urchin became cheeky, and actually, on a memorable morning, told him to clean them 'hissself, as he wasn't a-going to get up at unearthly hours afore it were light.' When the ex-priest complained to Mr. Perkyns of the lad's insolence, that gentleman was not encouraging.

'You see, my dear Puckle, you cannot quite expect the servants to treat you with the same deference as they yield to me. Of course, I am their master, whereas—you must forgive me, but your position is not exactly assured—I

mean no offence. I shall certainly reprimand the boy for his impertinence, and let him know that he is to be both respectful and obedient to you ; but you are too well acquainted with his class to be sanguine as to the results of my scolding ; it is a maxim with such people that " who pays best shall get best served." Either they must be one's own domestics, or else one must give them thundering good tips.'

' I understand perfectly,' replied Mr. Puckle.

So he did, but he winced and felt that, although he had much to be thankful for, still he did not repose upon a bed of roses altogether free from pricking thorns. He, a gentleman, knew that Christopher was a sham, artificial gentleman, or, in other words, a common, rich, vulgar snob ; but it suited Edmund to reside comfortably in the snob's house, so he curbed his rising ire, bit his tongue till it bled, and maintained an outward calm and pleasant demeanour. In reality Puckle half despised his patron ; he was able to read him through and through like a book, for he was sharp and a good judge of character. He found nothing to admire in that gross nature, although he felt amicably inclined towards it because it resembled his own ; the affection he bore for Christopher, and that the latter recipro-

cated, was unworthy of the name, for each recognised the canker in the soul of the other, and by reason of it forged a friendship.

The ex-priest's tastes were decidedly strange in some ways. For instance, he kept a couple of tame snakes which he permitted to crawl about his room when he was alone ; at the same time he detested animals, and would not fail to give any dog or cat that ventured near him a vicious kick. He cared for no farinaceous food, and liked meat that was nearly raw, with red gravy ; he preferred bacon and pork, however, to beef and mutton, eating thick slices of either voraciously, also big coarse sausages. In one particular Edmund Puckle was singularly unoriginal, following in the footsteps of so many of his sex, for he ran after every pretty woman who was within reach. Indeed, he was a true brother of Christopher, every bit as sensual, or more so, and on arriving at Screeling Grange he made up his mind that he was not going to reside there without providing himself with some congenial feminine society. It would be far too dull boxed up in that dismal mansion, day after day, with his patron for sole companion. Besides, he didn't really care much for men—they bored him after a time—and he simply could not exist without women. He

adored their beauty and their lively ways, and he wanted love, the kind of love that satisfied his material disposition. A true, clinging, wifely affection would weary him; he quickly tired of a face and of a voice; he must have constant change—variety.

He had already espied a charming barmaid on his drive to the Grange. The town in which she dwelt was within a few miles' distance, and he determined to visit the damsel as soon as possible, and endeavour to ingratiate himself with her. If only his persuasive powers should be sufficiently potent to induce her to ask her employer for a holiday, so that she might spend a week or so at the Grange to help while away the weary hours, he would esteem himself a lucky man. He did not take Mr. Perkyns into consideration, for surely that gentleman would be equally delighted to act host to a young woman who could boast of such a handsome appearance. Edmund meditated thus whilst he assisted the carpenter to arrange the hideous black stuff upon the altar; every now and then he stepped backwards in order to view the effect of his work from a little distance, nodding his head approvingly. It was morning, the morning of the day on which the man had promised that all should be ready;

even now the draping was almost finished ; Puckle was giving the finishing touches. Two gigantic, massive gilt candelabra were on the floor, a pair of chased vases of golden hue, and a brasier to match. The sun streamed in at the window, which faced due east ; it flooded the room in a glorious shine, and struck flashes of light from the burnished plate, whilst the sparkling rays caused the awful looming black altar to appear even more horrible than before, and above the grinning skull stood out in bold relief from the blood-red wall ; it faced Edmund Puckle and grinned mockingly at him.

At that instant he looked up, and, observing how real the white painted thing appeared, by reason of the brightness, he shuddered. Just then the sunlight faded, and a warning shadow seemed to fall upon his soul.

CHAPTER III.

THE RITES.

NINE strokes had been chimed slowly out by the clock in the belfry tower of the old village church. The sound was wafted on the evening breeze across the wood to the inmates of Screeling Grange ; the tones still lingered in

the air. Mrs. Simcox and the factotum Gulliver were just sitting down to their supper in the kitchen. A genial warmth pervaded the apartment, for the weather was mild, yet not too close to cause the necessary fire to be a horrid nuisance to the domestics; on the contrary, it diffused a pleasant glow which permeated their frames deliciously, stimulating the ancient dame's stagnant circulation to quicker motion, aided by a copious draught of hot gin-and-water, in which the spirit predominated over the aqueous fluid. The window was open, and a soft wind blew in; it even fluttered the housekeeper's gray locks and toyed gently with her cap-strings.

'What an appetite you have got, to be sure!' she remarked to the boy, who was holding out his plate for a second helping of stewed beef and onions.

'I think you are a trifle mean, Mrs. Simcox,' he responded. 'I considers as I ought to take all I can out of master, and if I eats for two or three I only does right; he should keep more servants, says I—he's got plenty of cash, you bet. I does the work of one and a half, so that amount I means to eat out of the old cove. Why don't you buy a set of false teeth? then you would have a better appetite, I guess.'

He paused to take breath after having delivered himself of this lengthy speech, and passed his hand through the shock of his untrimmed sandy hair, looking up at Mrs. Simcox with a mischievous, impertinent expression upon his plain, freckled face.

‘Impudence! False teeth indeed, you young frog!’ she exclaimed angrily. ‘Clumsy boy, a-breaking of that vegetable-dish!’ she continued.

‘If you had to carry the dinner up them steep stairs, I expects as you would let the things drop, Mother Simcox! Now, don’t scowl at me so; you glare at me that savagely that I am shaking in my shoes. I must have a bit of fun sometimes. I ain’t got no one near my own age about the place to talk to; dull it is, I can tell you.’

He heaved a sigh as if overwhelmed with sadness; but his looks belied him. Inward amusement was struggling to obtain release in hearty laughter. Already the strained muscles of his countenance were beginning to relax, and by degrees they entirely gave way, and then Gulliver uttered a choking guffaw, followed by an uproarious burst of merriment, which continued till he was obliged to hold his sides.

Mrs. Simcox regarded him grimly ; her two-pronged fork, laden with a piece of steaming potato, was poised midway betwixt her plate and her capacious mouth.

‘ You are poking fun at me, you young rascal !’ she muttered. ‘ Have you seen the black study and the fearful red room draped like a hearse ?’ she continued, leaning across the table and fixing Gulliver with her green eyes as she asked the question. The tone of her voice was sepulchral.

‘ Ain’t I just !’ he replied, nodding at her knowingly. ‘ I can’t make out what high jinks them two are up to. I imagine they are going to play at funerals or something. Now, I did use to enjoy that there game with my school-fellows when I was a kid ; but what a real spree it would have been if we had had a nice lot of crape about ! One of us was a parson, t’other was the corpse, carried on a board, and the rest was mourners ; it were jolly, I can tell yer.’

Gulliver became so excited at these delightful reminiscences that he actually ceased gorging himself ; he had marvellous elocutionary powers. Just then a bell rang.

‘ Do you hear, you scamp ? That’s for you to clear. Now, look sharp and finish your

victuals, and up you goes to fetch me down the crockery to wash, and don't tell me no more of your horrors. As for them gents, or, rather, the master and that there Puckle, they are a comic pair; howsomedever, I am glad as they don't want me to clean those black holes out. I'm not a-going near them. Oh, bother! For in rising from her seat the old lady awkwardly managed to upset her glass of grog, and the liquid streamed all over the not too-immaculately white cloth.

'Oh, blazes! oh, blazes! 'Tain't me this time!' exclaimed the impish boy, and, uttering a yelling whoop, he performed a sort of war-dance round the kitchen table, at the same time brandishing a huge carving-knife and gravy-spoon frantically aloft.

'Drat the urchin! Get along with you, Gulliver!' she cried.

He made her a mocking bow, and still hooting, shouting, and jumping, so that his heavy boots clattered noisily upon the tiled floor, he at length turned round and round on his heels after the manner of a teetotum, with his arms extended like the sails of a windmill, and so moved nearer and nearer to the door; then, stopping short, he executed a somersault.

'Mercy! Oh! why don't we have a gal?

Them boys ain't worth their salt,' grumbled the housekeeper as she mopped up the wet mess and fed her big tabby cat with the remains of the meal.

At that instant Christopher Perkyns and Edmund Puckle were entering the study bearing lighted tapers in their hands, and they at once proceeded to illuminate it dimly by means of a lamp with an opaque crimson glass shade which had already been placed there by Edmund. The faint glow simply made darkness visible. The blinds were up, and a few stars already twinkled and peeped in ; but heaven's vault seemed sombre, impenetrable. The moon had not yet risen to glorify it with her mystic beauty, and transform it to a semi-transparency of deep sapphire, spangled with countless sparkling jewels. The men passed into the further room and lighted the tall, thick candles in the candelabra, which now stood upon the altar. Between them was the massive crucible and the vases, the two latter being filled with branches of yew, mixed in with hemlock, henbane, deadly nightshade, and other poisonous weeds ; scarlet toadstools, too, tangled posies of noxious, unhealthy vegetation, which loaded the air with a rank, stifling perfume.

Edmund took the brasier and placed some powder in it. From his pocket he produced a phial, and poured in a few drops of its contents, muttering some unholy incantation meanwhile. The stuff immediately ignited, and the fumes rose like incense. He replaced the crucible upon the altar.

‘Kneel,’ said he to Christopher as he sank down, prostrating himself as he would have done in a sacred edifice during Mass. His companion did likewise. Then Edmund offered up a prayer in the Latin tongue. Christopher was not sufficiently familiar with that language to comprehend its meaning, so he could not follow, but remained quiescent and expectant. He knew that it was a most blasphemous proceeding, but he cared not. Was not Satan all-powerful? Why, then, should he not be worshipped? Edmund’s gruff voice, which he had forced to take on a more insinuating tone, had ceased, and he was silent, his face buried in his hands. Suddenly he rose from his kneeling posture, and motioned to the other to do the same.

‘Lucifer, Prince of the Nether World,’ he commenced with flashing eyes and upraised countenance, ‘thou to whom has been granted the dominion of this wretched little planet,’ he

droned forth, and, pausing for a second, continued, with arms stretched out imploringly to the altar, where the smoke was still rising in a dense mist: 'Thou who hast riches, titles, honours, at thy disposal; thou before whom kings and rulers quail, for in thy hands are the keys of the fiery regions, and at death dost thou conduct thy faithful servants thither, those who have enjoyed thy good things and have accomplished thy work. O mighty Satan, well thou knowest that mortals in whose souls fiercely burn the desire, the lust, of material life can never be satisfied with that inert existence in heaven. Could they ever be content to drag out the precious ages of eternity in a cold, weary round of sameness? Would their souls melt in bliss whilst they joined in the songs of seraphs, to the accompaniment of the unimpassioned harp, the strings of which are indeed fit for the fingers of aerial beings devoid of senses, and to whom the delicious, feverish madness of earthly love is unknown? Ah no—a thousand times no! Hell with thee were indeed preferable—yea, it must be so. In hell there can be no stagnation. There, where the very atmosphere is fiery heat, scorching, dry, unmoistened by so much as a tiny drop of water—there alone must life be lived

in all its intensity. Every vein, every fibre, of the spiritual soul would surely throb with wild joy, stimulated to boiling-point by the fierceness of the roaring of surrounding flames. Will revenge not be all the sweeter? Will not hatred still prevail, and doubtless vengeance, to be wreaked with keener pleasure—the blow dealt with more certain aim? Shall he who loves to quaff strong drinks till his brain reels no longer be able to satisfy his craving amidst his boon companions whilst ribald jests delight his sense of hearing? And do not cards belong to thee, O Satan? Is not the gambler under thy special protection? He, too, shall continue that seductive, fascinating game of chance which was a source of ravishing, ecstatic delight to him here. Everything that gratified the eye, everything in which man luxuriated, and over which he gloated, must be reproduced and perpetuated in the kingdom below.'

The impious ex-priest paused once more for a moment; then, bowing before the altar, he recommenced his awful prayer in his accustomed loud tones:

'Angel of darkness,' he roared forth, 'whose servant I am, to whom I have irrevocably bound myself, hear me! Thou who stirrest up strife and createst deadly feuds between persons

and nations ; thou who guidest the knife of the assassin, the pistol and sword of the duellist—yea, even the course of the cannon-ball and the murderous bomb in war, hear me ! Thou who presidest over the torture-chambers of the scientist, the laboratories where the bodies of the helpless living beasts are torn and mutilated ; thou who gloatest over each bitter throe of pain which these inoffensive mangled ones suffer, hear me ! Prince of Devils, I adore thee ; Ruler of the World, deign to listen, deign to incline thine ear, and to manifest the greatness of thy majesty to him who now bends himself in reverence before thy sable throne.'

He ceased. Then, after having hastily extinguished the candles, he seized the brasier, in which the powder was still smouldering, and retreated backwards from the apartment, curtsying to the altar as he went exactly as he would have done in his own church. He motioned to Christopher to draw the *portière* and to follow him out. Thus they entered the gloomy black chamber, leaving the spring door open behind them.

Christopher was forcibly reminded of the tales of the Inquisition. Edmund now put more powder and liquid into the crucible, and placed it in the centre of the room on a small

tripod which stood upon a circular slab of slate-coloured marble that was almost level with the floor; then he took a long pliant wand, and with it he inscribed a magic ring on the marble. This wand was prepared in some way at the lower end, for as he drew sparks flew out, and by-and-by they were fanned into flame, and there was formed a wreath of blue fire around the brasier, from which a volume of smoke now curled upwards. Edmund muttered some incoherent words, and waved his arms to and fro, making passes over the crucible. Blue flickering flames presently issued from it. And now happened a wonderful thing. An icy gust of cold wind blew in—not from the window, for it was closed; it apparently came straight from the red room—and at the same instant the velvet, pall-like *portière* was thrown violently back, and raised against the altar was reared—oh, horror!—a fearful, amazingly tall figure, clad in sombre robes. It approached gradually nearer, preceded by a tiny phosphorescent ball, until it stood at the end of the black room. The face was terrific, discoloured, bloated; it bore the impress of sin and crime.

Christopher uttered an exclamation of alarm. The perspiration broke out upon his forehead. He was in mortal dread, terror-stricken, yet he

dared not call upon the Almighty for help, he who had given himself over to the arch-fiend. He longed to fly, but he could not move an inch ; his limbs had become powerless from fright ; his feet were glued to the spot. Edmund turned round and surveyed him with a sardonic, contemptuous smile, in which lurked triumph.

‘ Afraid ? ’ he said. ‘ Esteem yourself lucky, my friend. I have succeeded beyond my hopes, for Satan has hearkened to my voice. See, he has sent his emissary. Who knows but what he may himself honour us later ? Surely I am one of his favoured servants ; for did I not behold the majesty of his presence in Paris ? ’

His ally shivered ; but he, with undisturbed bravado, addressed the visitor from the other world :

‘ What and who are you ? ’ he inquired in stentorian tones, as he faced the ghastly shade.

A low, trembling, unearthly voice replied :

‘ I came in answer to your summons, O man ! ’

‘ Are you the devil ? Yet I hardly need ask that, unless it is indeed he under another form, and therefore unrecognisable to me, ’ continued Puckle.

The spirit responded thus :

‘ I am not the devil. I have not seen him ; yet am I surrounded by friends who once were human. I know not why I have come. I seemed to be impelled hither upon a wave of atmosphere, whether I would or no. Others are with me ; they are often by your side, for they are in affinity with you. But I only am visible to your eyes. The reason I cannot tell you, but I believe it is because I have not been yonder so long as they. Only twelve years have I been in hell.’

‘ What is your occupation ?’ asked his interlocutor.

The spirit’s voice was weaker than before as he said :

‘ On earth I was a sensualist, an evil liver, a drunkard, so I drifted hither. It is difficult to explain the mode of existence. I carry my hell about with me. It is more a state than a place. Where sin and vice are rampant, there am I. To the dark corners of your globe I come. My home is darkness. At times I fancy I hear a voice that strives with me, that attempts to awaken remorse, but I will not listen.’

‘ Are you happy ?’

It was Christopher who thus inquired. He had somewhat regained his composure, and was leaning forward with an intent expression of

countenance not devoid of terror. The spirit returned in a whisper :

‘ Ah, it is happiness for which I am restlessly seeking. I have not yet found it. It seems to elude me. There is no peace ; all is seething madness. It does not satisfy ; it seems to turn to gall and wormwood. Enjoy yourselves, my friends. I shall hope to meet you shortly, when you have put off mortality.’

The wreath of flame around the smoking bowl flared up fiercely ; it illuminated the spectre with its ghastly blue light. Both men now gazed in consternation at the fearful thing. Only now could they distinctly behold its features, and, lo ! it had no eyes. There were but two sockets, and the nose seemed to be eaten away ; the flesh of the face, too, appeared livid and in the last stage of putrefaction. And then suddenly the ring of fire was extinguished, and the ghostly visitant gradually faded from their view. As the last remnants of its robes disappeared there was a tremendous noise, a thud, as if something ponderous had been thrown to the ground ; the windows rattled, and the whole room shook. At the same time these words seemed to ring through the air, ‘ *And the wages of sin is death.*’ The wicked Luciferians looked at one another by the glow

of the red lamp, but Edmund smiled; he had quickly recovered himself.

‘Did you hear?’ asked Christopher, repeating the sentence, shaking in his shoes meanwhile.

‘Yes,’ answered his friend with cool indifference. ‘Either it was a case of thought transference—unconscious cerebration on your part, the idea forcing itself upon your terrified brain unknown to yourself, and from thence carried to mine—or else that visitant from the nether regions played us a prank. But see, there is something else.’

‘I am not sure that I am anxious to behold more,’ observed Christopher with hesitation.

‘Nonsense! you hardly expect spirits to resemble human beings, do you?’ retorted Edmund. ‘It is most interesting,’ he pursued; ‘let us go through with the affair, and not show the white feather. I am excited beyond measure.’

The master of Screeling Grange once more pulled himself together, and attempted to assure himself that he was prepared for anything. At the far end of the apartment was discernible a dread something; it was shapeless, formless, inky black, and around it flickered an angry, reddish-yellow phosphorescence. In the centre was a big scarlet blotch as of blood.

‘What a curious phenomenon!’ observed the ex-priest under his breath. ‘Are you a spirit?’ he queried in a louder tone.

The answer came as if spoken by a ventriloquist; the voice was thin, reedy, unsubstantial. From what part of the terrible mass did it proceed? Mouth there was none; all was shrouded. There was not a vestige of either face or figure.

‘Edmund Puckle, I come to you from the depths; once was I mortal, too,’ it responded.

‘Tell me more; what were you?—what are you?’ he asked with intense interest.

‘On earth I worked in the cause of science, but also to gratify my morbid tastes. I was a vivisectionist and tortured animals of every description, heedless of their sufferings. My victims surround me now wherever I go; I cannot rid myself of them. My soul is worried by the constant sight of blood, and I arrived in hell shapeless, as you perceive. Voices whisper in my ear that it is my own fault, that I am distorted by reason of my distorted mind; that day by day I tarnished and defaced the form Divine till it became as you see it now—unrecognisable, a blurred, obscured thing in which are neither members nor features. I am sunk down in iniquity, yet I glory in it.

‘They call me Prince of Fiends where I tarry.’ He laughed in a way which even made the desperate Edmund quail, while Christopher hid his face in his hands.

‘This is too much,’ he said with emotion. ‘I am not a squeamish man, and will go any lengths. I am wholly material, and I firmly believe that all things worth the having come straight from Satan ; nevertheless, I abominate cruelty to animals !’

As these words left his lips, three great banging knocks resounded on the ceiling immediately over his head, there was a flash of white light, and with a howling, devilish shriek the looming shadow with its fiery illumination vanished. Edmund stamped his foot with rage, and, glaring furiously at his patron, cried :

‘Foolish man ! you have spoilt everything by your scrupulous qualms. If you go in for the worship of Lucifer, it is useless to stick at trifles or do things by halves. Satan will not accept such lukewarm service ; either let us invoke him veritably and truly, and receive the manifestations he vouchsafes to us in a proper frame of mind—in fact, resolutely, without cowering and flinching, and I may add without quarrelling over the ideas of the apparitions or bristling on account of their sayings—either

let us do this or, for goodness' sake, make an end of it all. Tell me, then, is it your desire to be a follower of Lucifer or not ?'

He confronted Christopher as he spoke, and grasped him firmly by the arm. His friend hesitated for a moment, wherein the little good that was in him battled with the evil ; but evil was the stronger, so conquered.

'It is my firm desire to be a follower of Lucifer,' he said with decision.

'It must either be the whole, with all its details, or nothing,' observed the ex-priest more quietly.

'I fully comprehend ; my apparent fear was but a temporary weakness—an aberration ; and, as you wisely remark, one must do a thing thoroughly or not at all. I will nevermore raise my voice in protest, even if I cannot altogether agree with the spirits' notions ; such small matters are but trivial.'

So said Christopher Perkyns, and his still more wicked ally congratulated him warmly on his 'good resolves' and sturdy strength of character and purpose.

'And now, worthy friend and comrade,' he remarked insinuatingly, 'from my superior knowledge respecting this *culte*, I will give you some valuable information : We should

get on far better if we could induce some pure maiden to assist us.'

'What!' exclaimed Christopher, starting.

'Do I surprise you?' said Edmund, as an amused smile played about the corners of his pinched, pale lips. 'Don't think I contemplate harming her,' he continued; 'as I said, she must be pure and innocent, and it would be in our own interests to keep her so. There was no such maiden at the meeting in Paris; but I was told by one of the initiated that if a virtuous girl would consent to grace the ceremonies by her presence she was a tremendous aid, as, although she in no way interrupted the ghostly manifestations, which on the contrary seemed more brilliantly illuminated by means of her unconscious influence, she also kept unruly spirits in check owing to that innate purity; for spirits did indeed, at times, make themselves very objectionable.'

'Then, you see that, after all, my fears respecting those which honoured us to-day were not altogether foolish,' observed Christopher.

'I cannot agree with you there,' responded Edmund; 'they were perfectly tranquil. You are but a novice, and have seen hardly any-

thing yet. Shall I extinguish the lamp? I presume you do not intend to sleep here?’

He laughed rather maliciously.

‘No; let us go now, the clock is striking twelve. Good-night, Puckle.’

‘Good-night, Perkyns; pleasant dreams,’ called Edmund after Christopher, who had already reached the door.

He put out the lamp and followed, but before leaving the room he turned and peered into the gloomy darkness as if reluctant to quit the temple he had dedicated to Lucifer.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAIDEN.

THE night following on the evening which witnessed Christopher’s inauguration to black rites was not a restful one for that votary. Whether his imagination ran riot and played him tricks, or whether his fevered brain was guiltless and all that he heard, saw, and felt was real, tangible, and absolutely nigh him, literally in the air which he breathed, he could not tell. Neither did he know if, instead, he had been somehow placed upon the confines of the other world, and permitted to hover

there in a state betwixt sleeping and waking. The last hypothesis, however, seemed to his material mind to be the least probable. Putting the cause aside, the fact remained that Christopher was disturbed by the sounds of shrieks, yells, and peals of demoniacal laughter. Then there were groans, and through his room was borne what appeared to be a flaming torch, followed by a terrible figure draped in black, that almost touched the ceiling; it turned its head towards Christopher as it passed, glaring at him with two wicked eyes which were set in a ghoulish visage. Soon all became dark, and a cold, clammy hand was laid on his forehead, whilst a heavy weight fell upon his bed and pressed against his feet; then he remembered nothing more until morning, when he awoke with an unrefreshed feeling and a dry palate.

‘What is the matter with you?’ inquired Mr. Puckle, noting his friend’s haggard countenance as he took his seat at the breakfast-table.

Christopher related his night’s experiences, and asked the ex-priest’s opinion as to their origin.

‘A disordered digestion, my good Perkyns; you have had the nightmare.’

And he went on to give him a scientific dissertation upon dreams with relation to the

stomach, so that at length Christopher, who, although well informed, did not pretend to any technical knowledge of either metaphysics or physiology, was satisfied that he had been the victim of the fiend nightmare, and troubled himself no further in the matter. 'A lovely day, is it not?' said Edmund. 'Will you lend me the gray horse and dogcart? I should enjoy a drive to Kingsford.'

'Certainly, my dear fellow; take it by all means,' was the rejoinder; and Puckle walked round to the stables in high spirits, in expectation of a delightful flirtation with the pretty barmaid.

As for the owner of Screeling Grange, he determined to go over his property, which he had not done as yet, having only taken a superficial look at the flower and kitchen gardens. The sun shone brilliantly when he put on his hat and emerged through a side-door into the grounds. A balmy breeze blew through the trees, bringing with it the sweet fresh perfume of early summer, for it was but the first week in June. The birds fluttered, twittered, and filled the air with song. The insects hummed, and now and again a scared rabbit on the grass-grown path would hie away through the thick tangled undergrowth of fern and weeds, or

a tiny squirrel, which had descended from its leafy home for a little variety, on the approach of Christopher would scamper off, clamber up an adjacent tree to a friendly branch, and sit coolly surveying him from that point of vantage with its bright round eyes. The new owner walked onwards, swinging his cane as he went.

There was a feeling of pride in his heart—pride of possession. It was so pleasant to think that the house and small forest were his very own, and the rich pastureland, too, towards which his feet were wandering, for just now the path led down through a gate into a fair meadow in which some quiet cows were contentedly browsing. Buttercups and daisies abounded and besprinkled the mossy turf, which was so elastic and deliciously soft to his tread. He looked around complacently ; then he smiled to himself as he gazed upon the beauteous landscape : for, turn which way he would, all belonged to him, and he was a man who gloried in acquiring and having, not so much for the enjoyment which the things brought him, as for the increased self-esteem they aroused in his breast, and the halo of importance which was thereby imparted to him in his own eyes and in those of the world in general, for he considered that surely he

was a star of the first magnitude upon which all telescopes must be fixed with absorbing interest.

Christopher continued to muse blissfully whilst he sauntered along close to the briar hedge which divided one meadow from the other. By-and-by, as he reached no gap or gate, he vaulted quickly over it, and landed almost on the top of a lovely girl who was sitting on the further side reading; so much was she startled that she let the book fall from her ungloved hands and rose to her feet. She was not above the medium height, but so perfectly proportioned that she appeared to be a good deal taller. Her luxuriant golden-brown hair was brushed back from her rather low, broad forehead, and gathered in a simple coil at the back. Her face was somewhat tanned by the sun; but at any time its tint must have been more brown than white. The nose and mouth were like those of a statue; the eyes clear, soft, brown, large and liquid as the eyes of a gazelle. She was clad in a pink cotton frock, and at this juncture her cheeks almost matched or surpassed it in tint, for she was blushing furiously.

‘I beg your pardon most humbly; I am exceedingly sorry, I assure you. It never struck me when I jumped that anyone would be on the other side.’

Christopher stood surveying her in a shame-faced way ; he had raised his hat and stammered out his apologies in the best manner of which he was capable, for he did not possess the courtier-like polish of a man who has all his life mixed in the best society in Europe ; Christopher had not enjoyed this advantage. It occurred to him rather late that the book lay on the ground ; he picked it up and gave it to the young lady. In the meantime she had already told him, in a sweet voice, but shyly, that he had nothing to apologize for ; that, in fact, she ought not to have seated herself so near the hedge. Now she took the volume from his hands, and gracefully thanked him. She did not resume her seat, but began to move slowly away ; then she suddenly paused, and, as if impelled by some new thought which had just flashed to her brain, she said, blushing even more violently than before, whilst the words came hesitatingly from her rosy lips :

‘It is I who ought to apologize ; for I believe—I think I am trespassing upon your property.’

She looked so sweet, so fresh ; she was dressed in such perfect taste. The little pointed brown shoes peeped out from the edge of her skirt ; her white straw hat, with the sprays of

pinky-mauve lilac, suited her so well. Christopher's instincts informed him that she who stood before him was a refined gentlewoman, every inch of her, and he thought he had never yet seen such a beautiful, fascinating feminine creature; he was abashed by her innocent glance, in which mingled the veriest tinge of hauteur.

Yet was Christopher not too abashed to make the most of this auspicious opportunity; he was too great an admirer of the sex for that. That idea of 'trespassing,' too, was capital; he would trade upon it. What an acute little thing she must be to discover that he was the new owner of Screeling! How nice of her! For this alone she rose in his estimation, if to rise were possible, when she had so favourably impressed him already.

'You have guessed rightly,' he responded, with the greatest deference he could muster. 'I am the owner of Screeling Grange, but—if I may venture to be so bold as to ask you a question—why did you think so?'

He was very respectful, but he looked at her fixedly with his piercing bold black eyes as he spoke. He was determined to get a decisive answer if possible. The girl reflected for a moment; then she replied, with rather more composure than had hitherto been apparent:

‘You see, all the residents are well known to me—if not personally, then by sight, for I live in the neighbourhood; so I knew immediately that you were a stranger, and as I was aware that a gentleman had just arrived at Screeling——’

Towards the end of the sentence she became nervous; her voice shook. Christopher interrupted her with:

‘So you thought I must be that person—very wisely too. Have you heard my name?’ he added quietly.

She did not reply, and seemed confused; she thought that this conversation with a man whom she had never before seen was odd. Ought she to continue it? Seeing that she remained silent and looked down, poking the point of her dainty violet silk parasol into the sod, he continued:

‘My name is Christopher Perkyns. As for the transgressing’—and he laughed—‘I shall only be too proud if you will walk just wherever you please about the grounds. And now will you let me know to whom I have the honour of speaking?’

‘My name is Iris Amering, and I live with my aunt at a place called Snatchels,’ she added.

‘Wait one moment, will you, please, Miss

Amering? Don't think me impertinent, but tell me if I may call upon your aunt; you see, we are neighbours. Of course, I am aware that it is usual for new-comers to wait till the residents call; but, then, I am a man.' He smiled, and stepped a little nearer to the girl as he spoke.

Iris Amering did not hesitate now; ordinary civility demanded that she should reply at once; besides, whatever the man might be—she knew nothing about him—he was deferential and polite.

'But certainly—of course; I am sure my aunt Everilda will be pleased to see you.'

She did not smile, though; she looked gravely at Christopher as she spoke. She did not wish him to imagine that she was in the least desirous of his coming, nor was she; it would be the same to her if he came or not. He was scarcely a perfect gentleman; therefore he over-acted his part, and excused himself too much.

'I trust you do not think I presume,' he recommenced; 'if you think it is a liberty, pardon me; but what is your aunt's full name? who am I to have the pleasure of asking for? and where is your house?' Then he added, smiling again a smile which was a little mischievous, 'I thought that, as you owned to being a tres-

passer, I had more right to question you than had it been otherwise.

Iris drew herself up slightly ; she did not feel inclined to joke with this chance acquaintance.

‘ My aunt’s name is Lady Everilda Dacre, and we live almost opposite to your lodge gates—to the left as you come out of them ; ours is quite a small, insignificant place, you know,’ she responded ; then she bowed. ‘ Good-bye, Mr. Perkyns,’ she said, feeling that the interview had lasted quite long enough, if not too long.

Christopher lifted his hat.

‘ Good-bye, Miss Amering ; I shall hope to pay my respects shortly.’

He waited, trusting that she might say something more, but she simply inclined her head and turned on her heel. The new owner of Screeling was too fascinated to move ; for several moments he remained in the same position, watching the retreating figure of the lovely damsel, and it was only when she was completely lost to his view by a turn in the wooded path which she had chosen, that he walked unwillingly and slowly away in the opposite direction. Already was his material soul awakened to loftier, worthier sensations than it had yet known ; half blindly and gropingly was it commencing to break through the restraining

fetters of entire gross earthiness which had hitherto bound it in dark slavery. The angel in the maiden it was, who, looking out of those pure eyes, searched out the shrinking, shrivelled spirit, causing it to rouse itself almost imperceptibly from its dull lethargy and to expand wings, which from disuse, since it descended from its starry home to be thus embodied, had wellnigh forgotten how to flutter.

The women with whom Christopher had come in contact during his life had been utterly unlike this one, and, as has been previously stated, had not touched him; they had been mere trifling sources of amusement, nothing more. Why was the unconscious influence exerted by this girl so different to that of the rest? The case was unprecedented. Granted that she was lovely, the true reason did not lie there; there was some subtle potent cause which he could not discover, analyze her as he would. So he presently ceased endeavouring to unravel an impenetrable mystery that was beyond his mental powers, and contented himself in centring his thoughts upon the maiden, as she stood revealed to his heart and senses, and he found that she was passing sweet. Two things did he inwardly determine: one that he would call upon Lady

Everilda Dacre as soon as possible ; the other, that he would keep this chance meeting from the knowledge of his friend Edmund Puckle. He continued his roamings till late in the afternoon, and Puckle only returned home about an hour after he re-entered the house. His countenance beamed as he greeted Christopher.

‘ Delightful day I have had, such cheery company ; only wish we might transplant some of it here to enliven us,’ he exclaimed, and he winked knowingly as he spoke.

To his surprise, the other did not exhibit the intense eager curiosity which he had expected.

‘ Really,’ he replied rather languidly ; ‘ whom have you seen ?’

‘ Two of the prettiest little girls under the sun : one is Cora Willis, the barmaid at the Dragon ; the other a charming burlesque actress friend of hers, Lala Percival,’ he said, smiling like an alligator.

‘ What a fellow you are with the women, to be sure !’ remarked Mr. Perkyns with a marked vein of sarcasm in his tone.

‘ Well, I don’t think I am a patch upon you, my friend,’ retorted the ex-priest. ‘ What’s happened to you ? you don’t seem quite in your usual form.’

‘Eh? Oh yes, I’m all right enough,’ responded Christopher shortly.

‘Look here,’ recommenced Edmund, lowering his gruff voice : ‘I have a brilliant idea. How about inviting the fair Lala to stay here for a few days? She’d be charmed, I am sure. Then, although Miss Cora seems a trifle more stand-offish and particular, with some clever management and a good deal of pressing I bet you a sovereign that I shall most probably get her to come, too. Cheer you up, my boy. Ha, ha, ha!’ And he slapped his friend vigorously upon the shoulder.

Christopher winced and started as if he had been stung by a venomous serpent. He cleared his throat.

‘Look here, Puckle,’ he said with determination : ‘you seem to forget that there is such a thing as reputation. Pray what will the county families say if they hear that I entertain such company — I, a new-comer? Why, they wouldn’t receive me at their houses, and I should be the last to blame them. Pray visit what friends you like ; don’t let me interfere with your movements in any way. There is only one thing I must beg of you—that is, that you bring none of those people here ; for women of that class I will not have inside the

doors. Don't be offended; for, after all, Screeling Grange is mine; and I want you to understand that what I now say I mean.'

He contracted his brows and emphasized his words strongly. Puckle gazed at him with more and more amazement as the speech wore on, till, in fact, his astonishment could reach no further pitch. It was some time before he could find a voice in which to speak, or words to express his scattered thoughts. At last he observed, whilst he stared at his patron, as if vainly attempting to penetrate the brain of that recent aspirant to saintliness :

'You may have implicit faith in me. I will respect your wishes; but I must say I hardly think a quiet little lark under the rose need reach your neighbours' ears. Who would bruit the news abroad? Besides, my good Perkyns, you are a bachelor, and as such, even did tiresome, meddlesome birds tell nasty tales, you might be forgiven. Women of gentle birth are so lenient towards the frailties of the opposite sex, especially if the offender happens to be rich. Moreover, if one plays the devil a bit, one acquires a sort of prestige in their eyes. Do not the scamps and the jolly fine fellows of somewhat imperfect morals almost invariably find the way to the dear ones' hearts, when the

faultless pieces of male propriety are scorned as "so stupid, so dull and uninteresting"? Trust me for knowing the world, my boy. You have never been anything else but a layman, whereas I, having been a member of the priesthood until lately, can call up my experiences for your benefit as well as for my own. Although a poor man, I have some advantage over you, because I understand human nature better, seeing that for years I was compelled to study it. Consider the confessional; then tell me if that would not be likely to teach one the intricacies of the heart. Conceive of the dread secrets which have been confided to me; imagine the crimes, the vicious, sinful acts and thoughts, for which absolution has been sought at my hands. Do you suppose that I found the fair sex pure, immaculate, stainless? Not so, my friend. Many are the feminine souls which have been laid bare to my gaze. Far from white were they; rather should I term them sullied and guilty, for the most part. Such a pretence of innocence, and in truth a black slough of iniquity! More devils than angels. Not that they pleased me the less for that—on the contrary. But why do I tell you all these things? Simply for this: To deter you from wasting your life, from re-

fraining to pluck the roses by the way for fear of evil tongues. Strange counsel from one who has been a priest!' He laughed wickedly, devilishly, then quickly added: 'Care not for what those sham, prudish county ladies say. Amuse yourself, enjoy yourself. Afterwards they will receive you as a hero with dimpling smiles and open arms.'

Christopher had paid but scant attention to the commencement of this lengthy discourse, but as it went on he became more interested, and his anger was roused; for although his own pretty extensive knowledge of women had led him to form the conclusion that there were a good many bad and unprincipled ones among them, he did not see why the ex-priest should condemn almost the whole sex in such an unjust, sweeping, wholesale manner, for he was aware that by far the larger half were excellent, and worthy of all honour and praise. His ire rose by leaps and bounds. The hideous advice with which Edmund brought his oration to a close disgusted him in the present sentimental mood in which he lovingly lingered, and brought his fury to a head. He had been pacing up and down the room. Now he stopped all at once opposite Edmund, while, with his whole countenance distorted with anger, he exclaimed:

‘Damn you, tempter that you are! I refuse to listen any longer!’ And so saying, he strode out of the apartment.

Edmund turned away towards the window, uttering a smothered oath. He had grown livid with rage.

‘What a cur the man is!’ he soliloquized. ‘He is as capricious and uncertain as a woman, too. There is something unaccountably strange about him to-day, besides. What is it, I wonder? If the idea were not preposterous and impossible, I should be inclined to think he had fallen truly in love. Were I not in such comfortable quarters, I should part company with the vulgar, uncontrolled son of the people. At this moment I hate him so, that if I could do him some injury—plot against him after the deliciously cunning manner of the Jesuits my brethren, for instance—it would afford me real pleasure.’

And in the nasty, pale-blue, glassy eyes was a hellish light, whilst, to console himself for his patron's show of temper, Edmund betook himself to the black study, there to commune with the evil that was in affinity with his own darkened soul.

CHAPTER V.

THE LADY EVERILDA.

A FEW days had elapsed since the quarrel. Christopher was not the sort of person to sulk, so that within a short space of time he calmed down and regained his normal placidity. Edmund, too, assumed a dejected appearance, and, without daring to speak much, silently offered small attentions, thus altogether demonstrating his contrition for that ill-advised, objectionable harangue. He hazarded a remark or two ; the roughness of his voice was softened, and in his manner lay respectful solicitude. His patron was not proof against such lowly self-abasement ; he reinstated the delinquent in his good graces. But the artful ex-priest saw that he must be careful. Seeing that Christopher's wrath had departed, he ventured to ask if it would not be well to continue the Luciferian *culte*, but the master of Screeling replied that he felt no inclination to do so at present ; therefore Edmund discreetly held his tongue.

Ever since that battle of words it had rained incessantly, and the Grange, without the faintest ray of sunshine to brighten its gloom, had

indeed been dreary. Until now Christopher had jumped out of bed in a tremendous hurry every morning; up went the blind, and out he gazed, to find the country wrapped in a dense cloudy sheet of drenching rain. How he had fumed! Would it never more be fine? He was sick to death of this depressing deluge; it was positively detestable! When should he be able to pay the visit to which he looked forward so longingly? His soul was in a turmoil; he could think of naught but that fascinating, fairy-like maiden who had woven such a spell around his being. How could he present himself before the searching gaze of those large velvety-brown eyes like a dripping merman who had just risen from mid-ocean? And the state of the ground was such that he could not imagine what the condition of his nether limbs and boots might be on his arrival. He had no brougham, and, anyhow, to drive such a short distance through water-spouts would appear quite too ridiculous. Both ladies would say to themselves that this new neighbour of theirs was nothing better than a madman to elect to call upon them when it was not fit for a dog to be abroad.

At last, at last! Oh, joy! Christopher, who had overslept himself, and never heard Gul-

liver's energetic knock at the door as he set down the hot-water can, awoke to find that dear old Sol was beaming and smiling in at him, which smile was immediately reflected upon his delighted face; in fact, he grinned with pleasure during the whole course of his toilette, which was performed more carefully than usual. He soaped his face over at least three times, so that it shone as brilliantly as the mirror, into which he found himself gazing almost every second with scrutiny, although he was but half aware of the fact. He trimmed his beard, and applied some scented brilliantine; he even gave his hair at the temples a turn with the curling-tongs, also the ends of his moustache, which for him was an unusual proceeding, as he was by no means a masherish dandy. He arrayed himself in a brand-new blue serge suit, and placed a diminutive diamond horseshoe pin in his well-arranged crimson tie.

All this extreme smartness was not lost upon the keen-sighted Edmund, who could scarcely refrain from uttering an exclamation of wonder when his friend entered the breakfast-room; indeed, he thought Christopher looked quite handsome, and he would willingly have bestowed his last new hat upon the kind person who could have given him the true reason for

this remarkable change in garb. Edmund's last new hat, be it said, was a very important item in his expenditure, whilst his patron held towards him the position of money-lender without hope of repayment. This state of things may have been already surmised or assumed, seeing that the financial condition of the ex-priest was totally unsatisfactory ; for his means were, as has been previously mentioned, nil.

On this particular morning Christopher was perfectly conscious of the effect that he was producing upon his satellite. He had a funny little trick of looking out of the corners of his eyes, and by this method discovered many things which were hidden from those persons who only saw what was immediately before them, unless they slightly turned their heads. He observed Edmund's amazed expression, and smiled inwardly. He thought it would be amusing to gratify his curiosity up to a certain point, and thus stimulate the action of his bump of inquisitiveness still more. So with lowered eyelids, in order to conceal the merry twinkle which lay beneath, he remarked casually :

‘ I intend paying a visit to a near neighbour to-day—the Lady Everilda Dacre. I think it would be friendly, do you see.’

‘Yes, of course. Who is she?’ inquired Puckle, endeavouring to appear as uninterested as possible, while the effort it cost him was apparent.

‘Well,’ said the other, with feigned indifference, ‘I thought it best to look her out in the peerage in case of mistakes, and I find that she is the sixth surviving daughter of the fourteenth Marquis of Parington. She was born in the year 1838, and is a maiden lady, don’t you know.’

He proclaimed her noble parentage with some triumph.

‘Oh!’ exclaimed Edmund; then he reflected for a moment. ‘I suppose you wouldn’t care for me to accompany you?’ he hazarded.

‘No,’ drawled out Christopher. ‘As it is the first time, I think I had better go alone. Don’t you think so?’ Then, without waiting for a reply, he added quickly: ‘Besides, she is sure to be out, I should imagine. Pray, don’t think me uncivil, Puckle! Later on, of course, we can go together; it won’t be so formal then.’

The ex-priest perceived that he was not wanted. Here was a decided puzzle. Usually, Christopher was only too ready to take him wherever he went. He dropped the subject,

and, like a parrot or an owl, meditated on it all the more in consequence.

At about a quarter to three o'clock, Christopher took his gray Homburg hat and agate-handled cane and left the house, walking off with a jaunty air. Usually, after lunch, he indulged in a mild cigar; but not so to-day. He did not wish to bring a perfume of tobacco with him to Snatchels. Indeed, the immaculately-white handkerchief which just peeped out from his coat-pocket was fragrant with lavender-water; and therein he, at least, manifested a refined taste, for he might have been mistaken enough to prefer the scent of Jockey Club, Ess. Bouquet, or kindred mixed non-floral vulgarities.

It was not long before he reached a very neat brown gate, on either side of which ran a perfectly-trimmed hedge. There was no lodge, and he entered the place feeling certain that it must be the right one, for it was near Screeling on the left, and there was no other along the road for a good mile. Before him stood the house. It was of red brick, gabled and overgrown with ivy. It was much smaller than Screeling Grange, and situated within a hundred yards of the main road. Two large green tubs filled with laurels were placed close to the porch, and there were also four trees cut out in shapes.

All looked deliciously old-fashioned and primly tidy. One could see the touch of the old maid's particular orderly finger upon everything at the first glance. Even the sound of the bell was precise, so Christopher thought. He pulled it rather gently, and there followed a sharp, spasmodic tinkle, as if the wire were stretched extremely tight. In answer to his summons, there appeared a most spruce, highly-respectable-looking parlourmaid of uncertain age, black-gowned, and with a frilled muslin apron, whilst her perfectly smooth dark hair, jetty possibly from a skilfully-applied dye, was brushed tightly away from her face, and screwed up in close braids under her cap at the back of her head.

‘Yes; her ladyship was at home,’ she answered in reply to Christopher’s inquiry, without the ghost of a smile on her demure visage.

Meanwhile, as the Master of Screeling followed her across the hall into the drawing-room, he congratulated himself upon his discretion in having started from home so early, for later Lady Everilda might have been out. As the servant announced him in a distinct and nasal tone of voice, there was a rustle of skirts in the far corner of the room, and a lady, who had

evidently been reclining at her ease in an arm-chair with her feet raised on another, rose hastily and came forward to meet him, whilst a small fat pug, with a blue ribbon tied round its neck, jumped off her lap and greeted the visitor by puckering its forehead more than usual and barking ferociously.

The lady was very pale and thin ; she was also very tall. Her hair was iron gray, and turned up from her forehead over a cushion. She had a large Roman nose, prominent meaningless blue eyes, and a tight mouth. Her hands were aristocratically long and thin. They were much beringed, and gave the impression of limpness and uselessness. She was attired in a plum-coloured foulard, upon which was an undecided white pattern. The skirt was very short, in order to show the feet, of which she was so proud, as they were her only good point. These were thrust into uncommonly-pointed, high-heeled shoes, and on the front of each was placed a sparkling paste button. A handsome diamond brooch fastened the lace collar at her throat.

‘Sit down, pray!’ she said to Christopher, as she seated herself with her back to the light, which came softly veiled from the artistically-curtained bay-window, so that the whole apart-

ment was deliciously and becomingly shaded—the result being a general toning-down of colouring, although, in reality, there were only subdued tints to be seen, with the exception of the blue-and-white china on the walls and the masses of variegated roses, tastefully arranged in vases and bowls, which were all refreshingly, daringly bright, the atmosphere being redolent of flowery perfume.

Lady Everilda Dacre made most of the conversation; for when Mr. Perkyns found himself on an occasional chair in proximity to the sofa upon which she had placed herself in a very erect attitude, he was so overpowered by her air of superiority, although, indeed, it was natural to her, that he seemed unable to discover his voice, whilst his tongue felt as if it were paralyzed and glued to his mouth. He replied mechanically to her questions, but could only articulate 'Yes' or 'No,' as the case demanded; and even so, he much feared that he was answering at random, for he could not properly collect his ideas. His hostess was far too well-bred to laugh at him; but Christopher fancied he detected an almost imperceptible quiver about her thin lips, as she coolly surveyed him with her cold, sharp blue eyes.

At length he managed to gather his wits together, and scrape up sufficient courage to utter words consecutively and coherently. He was aware that he ought to apologize for calling before he had been given a proper introduction ; so first of all, he did this, not very cleverly or gallantly, but passably. He managed, amid a good deal of hesitation and stammering, to say how he had chanced to meet the lady's niece ; and when he related the incident of the bound over the hedge, she allowed herself to smile, for she had heard the story from Iris ; and, strait-laced as she was, it had, nevertheless, caused her diversion by reason of its unconventionality. At this juncture the subject of their discourse entered ; and as things so often go by contraries, instead of the blushes being to-day on the maiden's face, as they were at the time of that first strange meeting, they showed on the countenance of the man.

Iris appeared to possess the calm of an unruffled lake as she gave her slim hand to Christopher. She smiled just a little, and looked at him quite frankly, without silly shyness. It was not the man's personality, his magnetism or charm, which had caused her former bashfulness and discomfiture, but simply the awkwardness of the position in which they both happened

to be placed at the moment. The unaccustomed, the novel and unusual, divergence from established rules had startled her. It was difficult to know how to act when suddenly pushed with force into an unknown groove, minus the least preparatory warning. Christopher thought that the girl was, if possible, lovelier now than before. She was modishly gowned in a white serge coat and skirt worn over a turquoise-blue blouse, with tiny white specks on it; her luxuriant, richly-tinted hair naturally showed to full advantage without her hat.

‘I think I left my Kodak here,’ she said, turning to her aunt. ‘I must take that photo while the sun is out. Who knows when I shall get another chance! Don’t let me disturb you, Mr. Perkyns, please,’ she added in an expostulating tone, as Christopher, having risen from his chair on her entry, remained standing until she should elect to be seated.

How bitter was his disappointment when, instead of this, she, having given out her intentions, immediately put them into execution by quitting the room, leaving her admirer to devour her retreating form with eager eyes whilst compelled to lend an ear to the Lady Everilda’s somewhat tiresome, stilted conversation. The girl was, indeed, completely en-

grossed with the pug, which had followed her to the door, and stood there wagging its curly tail and grunting like a juvenile pig.

‘No, no, Zulu,’ she cooed to the little beast tenderly, as she patted the soft, velvety head, which seemed to her so beautiful. ‘I will take you for a walk later; I am too busy now.’ And then she was lost to view.

Poor puggy seemed to be as disconsolate as was Christopher. It waddled across to him with a tail that hung straight down, and with a jump alighted upon his knee.

‘I suppose this is Miss Amering’s property?’ he hazarded, feeling that it was a case of ‘Love me, love my dog,’ as he straightway proceeded to pet the small creature, which began to nibble his fingers as a sign that the attentions were appreciated.

‘Oh yes, and I am afraid that Zulu is dreadfully spoilt by Iris; she is far too indulgent, consequently whenever she calls him he just runs the other way; but he is so good-tempered. I trust he is not annoying you, Mr. Perkyns?’

‘Dear me no; it is such a nice dog, and a fine specimen too,’ responded Christopher, thinking that he should not run in the opposite direction if that bewitching Miss Amering called him.

He felt that he had better take his departure—there was nothing worth remaining for ; so, putting the pug down, he rose to take leave of his hostess. She was perfectly civil, but that was all ; she did not ask him to call again, and gave him no invitation ; she said simply :

‘ I dare say we shall meet before long at some of the garden-parties, although I cannot say that I attend them all—they rather bore my niece, too. I give none, because the garden and house are so small, so you see I don’t entertain.’

Then he bowed himself out, and the grim parlourmaid, who solemnly handed him his stick (he had taken in his hat with him), reminded him of some awful guardian set to watch the portals of Paradise. So he left the abode of the charmer with a big heart-ache, and a sense of dead failure which obtruded itself miserably upon his infatuated brain. Meanwhile the innocent cause of Christopher’s trouble was employed in photographing the opposite side of the house and lawn, and having finished operations to her own satisfaction, she presently re-entered the drawing-room, and with a merry laugh observed to Lady Everilda, who was engaged in knitting a pair of socks for the parson’s wife’s last baby :

‘ Well, auntie, what do you think of him ?

isn't he odd? And the name too: Perkyns—Christopher Perkyns! What a combination! Now, if it were Bill or Tom, or, let me see—well, Adolphus Perkyns, wouldn't it be more suitable?'

She seated herself upon a low stool at her aunt's feet, and looked up at her mischievously.

'What a most ridiculous child you are!' replied Lady Everilda, as she drew back her thin lips in a slight smile. 'I have no doubt he is a very estimable person,' she continued with a pronounced tinge of haughtiness; 'but he undoubtedly never was, nor is, a gentleman, although, indeed, he tries his best, poor dear man!'

Here she sighed with regretful elegance. For everything which Lady Everilda did was elegant—rather too elegant at times—because there was such a lack of downright thoroughness about her that she seemed coldly or tepidly insipid, and some persons were wicked enough to say that they longed to stick pins into her or shake her, or, indeed, shock her in some way, to see if for once she would appear less torpid and frigidly correct. Even her little niece found her trying, the lady was so formal and unresponsive; she was not at all companionable, either, besides being dreadfully faddish.

How poor Iris suffered from the heat during the summer months on account of Lady Everilda's fear of burglars! Even before it was dusk every window was closely barred and shuttered; then the strong-smelling paraffin lamps were brought in, which, curiously enough, in no way offended the dame's aristocratically refined olfactory nerves, although the unfortunate Iris suffered terribly therefrom. The rooms were decidedly small, yet, no matter if the temperature almost verged on the tropical, she had to sit quietly uncomplaining in the stifling atmosphere, without a breath of air to cool her fevered, throbbing brow. Lady Everilda objected to going to bed early, and must needs keep Iris up till eleven and half-past eleven every night, because she was 'too nervous' to remain alone in the drawing-room.

Iris was sufficiently naughty on one occasion, when she was very sleepy, to suggest that Aunt Everilda should let her retire, and have the grim parlourmaid, Sarah, to keep watch just outside the door; but the good lady would not see it, and bade Iris sleep a little on the sofa if she pleased. The aunt was excessively indolent, too; she imagined herself an invalid and delicate, when in reality she was almost as strong

as a horse. The only exercise in which she indulged was indoor horse exercise upon one of those machines like baby-jumpers, and every afternoon, unless there had been a few drops of rain in the morning, she would walk with stiff, measured steps twice round the garden, in goloshes, for even if the ground were dry as a bone, and the grass brown and parched, she never dispensed with those beloved rubber shoes. In this way Iris was forced to take her walks alone, and, indeed, Lady Everilda should not have permitted so much freedom in coming and going to a young girl of barely twenty ; but, oddly enough, with all her cranks, this had not struck her. There were not supposed to be any tramps about, and the farmers and villagers were respectable enough, so that my lady never thought that any harm could befall her niece. Youthful squires were few and far between ; there was not one for miles round, so that there was no danger of any surreptitious and unchaperoned love-making ; besides, Iris was far removed from and above all suspicion.

The meeting with the new owner of Screeling had not disturbed the aunt in the very slightest degree ; according to her ideas, he was too old, too common, and too unpolished, to engage a young girl's fancy, and she was even too blind

to remark the man's very evident undisguised admiration for her niece.

Iris was the orphaned daughter of Lady Everilda's favourite sister, who had died in giving her birth, and her father, Captain Amering, was killed in the Boer War. When he left England to meet his doom, he confided the little maid to the care of her aunt, with whom she had resided ever since. Iris was an intelligent, bright girl, very high-principled and affectionate; she had seen but little of the world as yet. Certainly she had been introduced into the sleepy society of the county, and had danced to her heart's content at a few balls with some rather turnipy rustic swains, who were not calculated to make that heart beat faster, except by reason of the speed with which they whirled her round in the mazy waltz. Therefore Iris did not at present even know the meaning of the word 'love'; she was like a fresh, sweet rosebud which has not opened one leaf in response to the vivifying sun, for that luminary's rays had so far not been sufficiently powerful or of the right prismatic blend to unfold the tender petals that held her soul's treasures in their keeping. The poetry, the enchanting beauty, of the girl's nature could be read in her countenance; but charming

as she might be, she was still immature. There was wanting that magical strain which had not yet reached her spirit's ears—the strain which can turn a life to bitterness or glorify womanhood so that the soul sings in unison. But whether for weal or woe, that feminine creature whose heart has never understood the melody, even though it may have passed her by, leaving her to weep, or to look back regretfully because it has not been sung to her, is no true woman.

To return to Iris, where we left her in the drawing-room.

‘Aunt,’ she said, ‘I think Mr. Perkyns resembles a wild man of the woods; he looks so fierce and untamed. Surely he will scare away the ghosts at Screeling Grange.’

‘What can you expect of a person who has lived for years in the backwoods of Africa, my dear?’ responded Lady Everilda, as she replaced her neat feet on a chair; she sniffed haughtily as she spoke. ‘It was civil of him to call, of course; but I wish he had considered it unnecessary to do so. People of that kind are so very uninteresting. As for ghosts, Iris,’ she continued reprovingly, ‘I hope you believe in nothing so foolish; how can spirits return, pray? Only the uneducated can credit such a thing. You had better take Zulu for a walk

now ; that man has quite knocked me up ; the effort of making conversation was really beyond my powers.'

Iris lifted the pug from the basket in which he was comfortably curled up, and went towards the door, carrying him in her arms ; then she turned and remarked with some hesitation :

'Do you intend taking me to the bazaar to-morrow, aunt ?'

'I had not thought of doing so, but, as the weather is so genial, really I don't think the drive would hurt me ; besides, it would please Mrs. Fitz-Calien, and as you seem to fancy the idea——' She paused a moment, as if carefully to weigh the important question in her own mind ; then she said : 'Yes, I will go ; do you mind just telling Keane that she must rearrange the sleeves of my gray silk gown—they are much too voluminous and out of date. Give her the *Lady's Pictorial*—there it is, on the table—and show her the bodice worn by Lady Ramford at Sandown ; I like the sleeve immensely, and want mine copied from it exactly ; will you say so, dear ? And mind you tell Keane to make haste, for I must have the dress ready to wear by half-past two to-morrow.'

'Very well, aunt,' replied the girl.

'Look here, Iris : you won't expect to go to

that stupid bazaar if it is the least bit colder to-morrow, for in that case I couldn't think of driving so far—I should certainly catch a chill. By the way, please tell Keane to see that the buttons are firmly sewn on my best kid boots, the pair with the extra-high heels; she has grown so dreadfully careless that unless she greatly improves I shan't keep her. She isn't worth £35 a year, with extras. I wish now I had said that the wages were to include beer. Tell her to put new strings on to my green straw bonnet, the one with the pink hydrangea, and I must have the lace ruffle on my new mantle made fuller. The lace is in the cardboard box in the second top drawer of the wardrobe, tell Keane; yes, that's all, thank you!' as poor Iris, whose patience was well-nigh exhausted, had her hand already on the door-handle, trusting that the list of commissions was complete, and that she might escape.

'Very well, aunt,' she said; 'I will be sure to remember;' and she beat a hasty retreat, wondering as she ascended the stairs, with the little dog following behind her, for she had set him down, as he was rather heavy, how the maid would ever have time to examine the condition of her grass lawn frock. Lady Everilda's toilette required the same attention as usual,

which meant that, whenever she was pleased to anticipate gracing a festivity with her august presence, all her clothes had to be altered at the last moment, for she was capriciously fond of constant change, and never allowed sufficient time for the alterations, consequently the situation of abigail to her ladyship was not altogether an enviable one; and Iris, who shared the attendant's ministrations, came off decidedly badly.

In the present instance Iris did not much care if her gown were perfection or not, so long as it was passable; she had no other, for her dress allowance was limited, and she could not afford to be continually purchasing new dresses. She wanted to go to the bazaar, because it would make a change in the monotonous weekly round, but, after all, it was not a ball, only a quiet sort of day affair. Therefore it didn't seem to matter if she only looked her second-best in raiment which, though neat, might be slightly unmodish, because it had been fashioned a trifle too early in the season, before the 'latest thing' was out.

'Dear, oh dear! If only her ladyship had let me know that she was going before this!' exclaimed Keane, when Iris had delivered the message and given the orders. 'I shall have

to sit up all night,' she added. 'As for your dress, miss, I don't like to think of your wearing it as it is ; but, anyhow, I have had my hands full for the last fortnight, so I couldn't have done anything to it. Woollen underwear I am still making for her ladyship ; she is 'out size,' you know, and cannot find ready-made garments to fit her properly ; she keeps asking me every day if they are not finished. Well, now I shall have to leave them for a bit.' She sighed.

Iris felt rather sorry for the worried maid, but it was only a momentary feeling : she looked out on the bright sunshine, she heard the happy twittering birds, and she put on her hat and went out, singing to herself as she walked through the garden and away into the green fields, with Zulu scampering at her heels.

CHAPTER VI.

THE EVIL SOUL.

CHRISTOPHER'S countenance on his return to Screeling would scarcely have been recognised as the same with which he set out to Snatchels ; it was then radiantly beaming, now it was irately lowering, and discontent and infelicity

were plainly manifested in every feature. Edmund was sunning himself at the front-door when his friend reappeared, and one glance at that cross, dejected physiognomy was sufficient to inform him that, whatever had been Christopher's mission, he had singularly failed in its satisfactory accomplishment. Christopher literally glowered at Edmund; he passed into the house without uttering a word, threw his hat on to the table as if it were a cricket ball, and banged down his stick into the stand, where it clattered amongst the rest. The expriest softly whistled; then he entered the front-hall, treading stealthily like a big cat, and, walking into the stiff, dull drawing-room, took up the *Times*, which lay on the table, and immediately appeared to become deeply absorbed in the news; in reality, however, he was intently watching his patron, who had seated himself upon a chair near the window and was in the act of lighting a cigar. His countenance had by no means cleared; he scowled heavily. Edmund bided his time; he argued that, if he waited long enough, Christopher might become tired and weary of maintaining silence; perhaps at last he would confide in him. They sat thus for three-quarters of an hour by Puckle's watch; then Christopher spoke.

‘I think this is a beastly neighbourhood,’ he said, turning his head for a second in Edmund’s direction, as he continued puffing at the weed.

‘Really!’ replied the other in as suave a tone as his gruff voice would allow. ‘You are in such a far better position to judge than I am,’ he proceeded cautiously and rather disjointedly. ‘The ladies on whom you called were countrified and unattractive, I dare say, now—mostly are in the provinces, I fancy!’ He glanced furtively at Perkyns, to note the effect of his words.

‘I think they are devilish unsociable and unneighbourly; there is no making headway with them,’ said Christopher grimly. ‘I did my level best to be polite, and all that kind of thing,’ he resumed with increased irritation; ‘but I am certain that that grand Lady Everilda didn’t take to me. I didn’t go down with her; she never asked me to call again, she gave me to understand that she did not entertain—kind of her that was!’ Here he laughed spasmodically and sarcastically. ‘Because I might have buoyed myself up with delusive hopes, don’t you know. Of course she conversed very pleasantly—oh dear yes! but she seemed like the Queen of Sheba, raised such miles above me; and, then, she expressed no pleasure at

making my acquaintance. And when I rose to leave, she didn't ask me to remain a moment longer; deuced glad to get rid of me she was, no doubt. A nice hash I have made of it; I almost wish I had never set my foot inside the swell's doors.'

Puckle essayed his utmost to conjure up a sweet smile as he answered: 'I infer, from what you relate, that the Lady Everilda is cut after the same pattern as the generality of formal, stately country ladies; their backs are mostly rigid, the hinge being too stiff to permit them to unbend. Their virtue is indeed uncompromisingly severe,' he laughed; then added: 'Does this charming lady reside entirely alone? has she no companion, no female relative with her?'

Christopher immediately betrayed himself. He pushed his chair round on the carpet, and, facing his friend, exclaimed excitedly:

'How the dickens do you know? Why do you ask me, seeing you have already informed yourself concerning this matter?'

His suspicions were unnecessarily aroused, for Edmund spoke the truth when he replied tranquilly, with inward amusement:

'You are talking in riddles; upon my honour, I know nothing whatever. If you will enlighten

my ignorance I shall be glad, for I am anxious to hear something more about this near neighbour. May I repeat my question? Does Lady Everilda reside alone?’

Christopher calmed down immediately; he believed Puckle.

‘She has a niece living with her—a certain Miss Amering,’ he replied quietly.

The ex-priest chuckled to himself; here, then, was the conundrum solved.

‘What is she like? Have you ever seen her?’ he hazarded.

Christopher hesitated a moment. Should he say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’? For his conscience had no voice in the question; it would not have upbraided him for telling a lie, it had long given up troubling itself with such minor details in morality. He arrived at the conclusion that it was more expedient to tell the truth; it would save complications which might possibly become too intricate for his not very lively imagination to grapple with. To lie well, one must possess a quick, fertile brain; ponderous reasoning mental gifts count for nothing in comparison.

‘Yes, I have seen her—a nice girl, very,’ he said.

Seeing that he had succeeded so capitally, Edmund thought he might venture even further.

‘Proud and stand-offish, too?’ he inquired.

But to discuss the fair Iris was what Christopher neither could nor would do. He was vexed beyond measure at the scant courtesy he had received at her hands, but that fact he was most decidedly not going to confide to the expriest; besides, he felt perfectly unequal to talking of her at all.

‘Oh no, oh no! it is rather a pretty house,’ he said to change the conversation.

Edmund was too wise to attempt to revert to the interesting topic; he saw that he had been treading on delicate ground, and he noticed that his patron winced at the last question. He was immensely diverted; he had so easily learnt what he desired to know. Of one thing he was now certain: Christopher Perkyns was in love with Iris Amering.

‘Really,’ he answered absently.

‘Puckle,’ began the other, as he rose from his seat, ‘you said something about continuing those services. If it suits you, I shall be delighted to assist at another this evening.’

‘Charmed, my dear fellow;’ and Edmund patted Christopher on the back, who uttered not another syllable, but quitted the room. Edmund Puckle remained behind.

‘Here,’ he mused, ‘is the result of a rebuff

from the object of one's affections ; if she does not choose to hold her slave in favour so that he feels nearing heaven (according to his own ridiculous idea), he will quickly slide back to hell. I thank my fortunate stars that I never did, and, I am positive, never shall, make a fool of myself over any fair creature in petticoats,' he continued inwardly. 'They are all very well to laugh with. I have no wish to feel my wings sprouting, neither do I ever quit the realms or the service of his infernal majesty. Love is moonshine—what they call "true love." It is too much trouble and ridiculous nonsense into the bargain. Then, unselfishness, generosity, and all the rest of the virtues—I never experienced any of them in my own mind. Did I when I was a boy ? Perhaps ; only it is so long ago that I forget. I believe I must have stifled all those pretty things one after the other, so that at last I do not know the feel of them. As for my heart, I am sure I must have crushed it to death in my hands ; there is not the slightest sensation left in it but hate : there is plenty of that, and to spare. But Christopher—am I not supposed to regard him with some sort of affection ? Who and what supposes such an absurd impossibility—he or I ? or Mrs. Simcox, perhaps.

Let us take Christopher first. Surely he cannot be so inane as to imagine I like him for any intrinsic virtue of his own? Pray, why should I, either? He must have sense enough to know that I like his money, his house, all the benefits which accrue to me through his agency. I believe, in reality, if I analyze my feelings towards him, that I *hate* him; that I dislike him because he has all the goods of this world which I lack, and therefore covet. In truth, I am jealous, envious, inordinately greedy of wealth, and I detest him when I think that I, who am so much better born than he, have to grovel at his feet, lick his shoes, and be indebted to him for the paltry sum he tenders me, as if it were some old bone he was throwing to a starving mongrel. The only bond of sympathy between us is the evil I recognise in his soul. Of late I have detested him more, because he has been striving to rise above my level, drawn by the silken thread of his "love," as he would term it, for that idiotic piece of flesh and blood; for in my eyes all women are wretched drivelling idiots: were they not, how could they imagine that they love us men? If only they could see us as we are, without their absurd idealizing fancies woven about us, would they cease to do so,

I wonder? Dear me! then the world would stop—better, perhaps, if it did.’

He laughed horribly.

‘Now,’ he continued, ‘I have disposed of Christopher, my dear pal Christopher, and his ideas concerning my deep, genuine affection for him. I believe I have also satisfactorily answered the question respecting my own feeling towards this dearly-beloved friend of mine. Ha! ha! ha! I may just add that sometimes, when I look at Christopher Perkyns, I think what a pity it is that I am not in his shoes, that I should make such a far better use of his life and possessions; and then I seem to loathe him more than ever, but occasionally he appears to me to be too mean for hatred: then I despise him. Why, for instance, doesn’t he keep up a proper establishment? He lives like a miser. Now we come to Mrs. Simcox. Does she think I am fond of Christopher? Yes; I am almost inclined to imagine that she believes that I like him, because I am grateful to him, forsooth! She said to me one day: “You wants some new brushes, Mr. Puckle; when I brushes them, the hairs all falls out. Now, the master he has five quite new; for sure he will give you one. He’s a good friend, and on course he is aware as how you regards him; he don’t

often complain, doesn't master. But now, if only we had a gal, the work would be done better, and she should do your room, Mr. Puckle; then it would be got ready a bit earlier, for of course I should alus [always] do master's. You might speak to master about a gal, Mr. Puckle, now." Judging from this curious and somewhat impertinent speech, which has somehow indelibly engraved itself upon my mind, I presume that the ancient Gorgon, who is a mixture of intense foolishness and extraordinary cunning, fancies that I have a good slice of affection for my "benefactor." The very thought of that word makes my blood boil. Enough; I have allowed myself too much license in meditation. One should never think; too prolonged brain effort in the same direction tends to madness; that is to say, if the mental force is wasted and used in a vain attempt to arrive at reasons and conclusions in abstract metaphysical subjects—subjects which no human being ever did or ever will comprehend. Mundane affairs repay study, and will do no harm; they are different. I must in future confine myself to them. Now, in the Satanic investigations I certainly have to keep my attention "fixed"; but there is no mental strain, no striving to understand the impossible. What

comes I receive with pleasure ; what is hidden I can wait for. I worry myself not at all ; on the contrary, were my researches directed heavenwards, my brain would reel and give way in attempting to fathom the impossible and non-existent, for at times I scarcely believe that there is such a place as heaven ; anyhow, I might wait until the end of the world before I should receive any sign from there, if the poor inert beings who have drifted yonder ever possess sufficient vitality to communicate with mortals, which I much doubt. But whither is my mind wandering again ? Full stop now ; I will have no more of it. I must go to my room and prepare the essence and powder for to-night's service. I wish the things were not so poisonous. I am compelled to finger them in the preparation, and even if I thoroughly cleanse my hands afterwards, some impalpable grain of pulverized stuff may adhere to them, or an infinitesimal drop of the fluid. If either touched my lips or fell on a slight scratch, I should be a corpse ; that is the worst of this meddling with such dangerous chemicals.'

Thus ruminating, the wicked ex-priest betook himself to his own apartment, which seemed to be permeated and pervaded with the noxious magnetism of his evil personality.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BAZAAR.

‘I DON’T think you can make the weather an excuse for remaining at home, Aunt Everilda,’ said Iris the next day, which was gloriously fine and warm; indeed, even too sultry for June.

Having delivered herself of this speech, she laughed gaily.

‘But I did not intend to make an excuse,’ responded the lady somewhat tartly. She was easily huffed. ‘Of course I am going; I tried on my new bodice, and I really think it looks very smart. Keane is certainly a first-rate dressmaker; perhaps she is worth the high wages, after all.’ Then as an after-thought: ‘By the way, what are you going to wear, Iris?’

She spoke languidly, as if the girl’s costume was a very minor consideration.

‘Oh, the old grass muslin, and my white satin sash, and black hat with pink roses,’ replied the other with indifference; ‘it will be good enough for a bazaar, at any rate,’ she added.

‘Decidedly,’ said the aunt; ‘besides, what does it signify, after all, if your frock is old or

new ? You are young ; it is different for older people—middle-aged ladies, for instance.’ (She disliked to be considered elderly.) After a pause, in which Iris maintained silence, she resumed : ‘ I sometimes think, Iris, that you are inclined to devote too much time and thought to your clothes, and so neglect to cultivate your mind. When I was a girl I dressed so simply, so did all the other girls : white muslins and ribbons—such cheap materials we wore ; the satins and brocades were left to our mothers and grandmothers.’

‘ And great-grandmothers,’ interrupted Iris, laughing once more.

It was certainly very cheeky of her, but she felt she could not help it.

‘ How very rude of you, Iris !’ exclaimed Lady Everilda, the faintest pink flush mounting to her pallid cheeks. ‘ It was most unladylike of you to break in with such a remark—making fun of me, too ! You really ought to apologize.’

‘ I didn’t mean it, aunt ; I am sorry I vexed you,’ said Iris, with a sort of semi-contrition.

‘ So you should be,’ replied her ladyship. ‘ But to continue my little lecture, which, indeed, I think you require : Instead of improving yourself by a course of reading, you waste all the precious hours in millinery ; no less than

four hats have I seen you trimming during the last ten days. Then, if you take up a book at all, it is some trashy novel; I have a good mind to stop that rubbish coming from the library; and, anyhow, I forbid your reading Arthur Legge's new book. I don't say that it is improper, or I shouldn't have sent for it; but it is beyond your comprehension, and——'

'Well, aunt,' interrupted Iris again, with a merry twinkle in her eye, 'if I couldn't understand it, surely it would not harm me.'

'You should allow me to finish my sentence, Iris; what has come to you to-day I cannot imagine—you are most discourteous. When I was a girl, I treated my elders with proper deference. I was going to say,' she continued, 'when you cut me short, that Arthur Legge's book is not suited for babies like you, only for persons of mature age and judgment; even for your age I consider that you are curiously juvenile. You often seem to speak without thinking, without first considering the effect your words may produce.'

'But, dear aunt, if I had to pause and reflect each time before I opened my mouth, I am sure I should end by never saying anything at all; besides, don't you think that in that way one's speech would be less genuine, natural, and true?'

‘Your remark demonstrates to me more than ever that you are deliciously youthful,’ replied Lady Everilda ironically. ‘My own opinion is—and I believe I am fairly worldly-wise—that speech was given us to disguise our thoughts, not to reveal them ; at any rate, as regards the feminine half of creation.’

The speaker gave utterance to this most ingenuous notion with the assurance of complete conviction, and as if there was nothing more to be said on the subject. She then shut her thin colourless lips tightly, and looked at her niece to observe if she took kindly to this idea. Iris gazed fixedly at her aunt with her candid, innocent brown eyes, in which lay a mingled expression of amazement and reproach. Then she shook her head gently.

‘It may be as you say,’ she said slowly ; ‘but, nevertheless, I cannot so regard the gift of speech, neither could I use it after that manner ; to my mind the idea is quite horrid. I do so dislike sham and humbug, and often think that if people would but give out their views honestly it would be better for everyone—the world at large, I mean.’

It was now Lady Everilda’s turn to be a trifle surprised ; after all, Iris did not seem quite so babyish as she had hitherto imagined ; she

actually had 'views of her own,' and she didn't seem loath to ventilate them ; the aunt only trusted she was not going to turn into a strong-minded female. She held the species in detestation ; at the same time, although the girl's notions appeared to her to be savagely crude, this artificial woman could not help allowing to herself that there was something rather alluring in the absolute frank freshness of this maiden mind.

'Rather alluring'—yes ; but it was a phase not by any means to be encouraged : girls must must not be 'pronounced,' they must have no 'views,' but follow after one another like sheep along the same safe, well-beaten track ; otherwise they would certainly scare away the men. It was all very well for literary women, artists and the sort of folk who were continually before the public, to take their own line and give out 'heretical' opinions, different from those of their sisters who professed the old-fashioned creed of the past ; but for a young lady whose object in life was a good settlement to hold 'ideas' which were not those of the generality of her sex who immolated themselves upon the altar of fashion—well—she must be suppressed and squashed.

So mused Lady Everilda as she ascended to

her room to array herself for the bazaar, Iris having flown like a bird into the garden to give her beloved puggy a quarter of an hour's exercise before she too went up to change her frock. At three o'clock the victoria, drawn by a pretty dappled gray horse, came round to the door, and the ladies were driven off at a smart trot, and soon reached their destination. The bazaar was held at a place called Marle Court, which belonged to an old man, a certain Mr. Percy Fitz-Calien, who was married to a particularly lively young wife. Mrs. Percy Fitz-Calien was never happy unless she was on 'the go,' and she made her ancient husband dance to a merry tune. When he led her to the altar, he fancied he had secured for his own a quietly domesticated little person, who would sit by his fire-side knitting his large-sized woollen socks, and uncomplainingly nurse him through occasional fits of the gout, which he gave himself by over-eating. Mr. Fitz-Calien was as selfish as old men so often are—more selfish even than the young ones; for the not very charming quality is apt to increase in magnitude with advancing years. Therefore, although no one could pity his wife—for why had she thus sold herself to an old mummified scarecrow, with one foot in the grave?—no one could possibly pity

the crabbed, cantankerous, desiccated monster, either. He had to enjoy his gout and accompanying tempers and tantrums alone, whilst Mrs. Percy Fitz-Calien was gadding about here, there and everywhere. He was inclined to be stingy and close, but the acute little lady had her own way of managing this bore of a husband. She invited her friends to luncheons and dinners, running up bills which she calmly ordered to be sent in to Mr. Fitz-Calien, who made a wry face when they arrived, paid them, and gave his wife a lecture on extravagance. As, however, words broke no bones, she continued to play the same game, and the house was constantly filled with company, including as many young men as she could muster, with whom she flirted harmlessly to her heart's content.

Mrs. Fitz-Calien earnestly desired to give a ball, but the old man wouldn't hear of it, and threatened that, if she went against his wishes in that respect, he would shut up Marle Court and take her off to a dull seaside place ; so she thought it would be imprudent on her part to go too far, and contented herself with giving a grand bazaar in aid of the funds for enlarging Marle Church, which, although decidedly small, was never half full ; but that did not signify—

a large addition was to be made, all the same. Mr. Percy Fitz-Calien was extremely pious ; he attended church regularly every Sunday morning in his 'go-to-meeting' clothes, which only saw the light once in seven days. He slumbered peacefully through the sermon, and when he returned home immediately read the *Sporting Times*, which he then sat upon, for fear that his wife might get hold of it ; and in a convenient moment he either tore it into fragments or burnt it. He established himself as censor over his wife's literature ; he cut and peered into every new book which came into the house, and of course he wrote out the library list himself. Nevertheless, there were sometimes one or two decidedly *risqué* French novels stowed away in his wife's bedroom, or hidden for the nonce behind a drawing-room sofa cushion ; but the worthy old gentleman had no idea that such was the case.

To-day Mrs. Percy Fitz-Calien was in her glory—entirely in her element ; she stood near the entrance of a big tent receiving her guests. She was a small, fair, fluffy-haired woman, with a turned-up nose, blue eyes, and a pink-and-white complexion, not wholly innocent of cosmetics. She was pretty and she fancied the powder-puff and rouge-pot might

assist her charms ; even the golden tinge in her hair was a thought too bright to be entirely natural. Of course some of her dear female friends said that 'she was a horrid made-up thing,' but they would have given their eyes to possess the beauty which they were compelled to own to themselves was there ; because beauty may be heightened, but not created, although it is possibly a mistake to endeavour to improve upon Nature. Altogether, the lady was a favourite, in spite of petty jealousies, because she was thoroughly good-natured, and was never heard to say an ill-natured thing. She was rather vain and flighty, and not an ideal specimen of womanhood ; but, then, how seldom one meets these pearls beyond all price !

Mrs. Fitz-Calien greeted Lady Everilda and Iris with effusion ; her ladyship rather liked the little woman, and patronized her. Iris thought she looked very attractive in her soft amber-tinted gown, with a toque to match, in which nestled violet pansies. Iris herself was quite bewitchingly lovely ; the grass lawn clung caressingly about her perfectly-moulded figure ; the white satin sash clasped the round slim waist—a waist in proportion to her size, not waspish, but exactly as it should be. The wide-brimmed black hat softly shadowed her sweet

face, and the pink roses matched the pretty pinky tint which shone through her light brown skin.

‘Do go in and have a look round, dear Lady Everilda!’ said the hostess in insinuating tones and with a slight lisp. She was like a captivating little spider, patiently waiting to catch and fix the flies in her web, as she waved her friends towards the tent door.

Iris passed in smilingly behind her aunt. Immediately within was stationed a servant, to collect the entrance fees, and he at once demanded the modest sum of five shillings from the two ladies.

Lady Everilda gave it, while whispering to Iris: ‘What an imposition! I call it atrocious! A shilling each would have been ample.’

The new-comers were at once pounced upon from all sides. A frightful cushion was poked under their noses by a plain damsel with a squat figure and a potato nose.

‘Do buy this lovely thing! I made it myself, and it is only a guinea.’

‘No.’ Lady Everilda feared it was too dear. And her drawing-room was already stuffed with cushions.

‘Let me tempt you with this beautiful table-cover—only ten and sixpence!’

This time it was a delightful creature of about five-and-forty, in an apple-green gown and spectacles, who held out the ghastly article—just suited for a lodging-house—for inspection.

Again Lady Everilda regretted she was unable to purchase, and Iris shielded herself behind her aunt. At length my lady was compelled to buy a pincushion and a cracked ornament, which had already done service at two former bazaars, and the niece was saddled with a pair of scent-bottles and a glass bowl. Thus laden, and feeling that they had done their duty, they were beginning to edge their way back through the crowd, when a man's voice from the rear said :

‘Lady Everilda, Miss Amering, if only I could reach you ! It seems almost impossible. Will you allow me ? Thank you very much indeed !’

The latter sentence was addressed to an enormously stout lady with a fine, buxom daughter, who were barring the way.

‘Here I am !’ and the speaker arrived, almost flattened, at Iris's side.

‘How do you do, Lord Kenamere ?’ said Iris, smiling and blushing slightly.

Lady Everilda half turned round. ‘How

are you, Peter? What ages since we have seen you!

‘Yes, dear lady. How has the world been treating you in the meantime? *Well*, I hope?’

A good, honest pair of violet-blue eyes were fixed upon her ladyship’s countenance, and the face to which they belonged was, if not strictly handsome, excessively good-humoured and pleasing. It was fresh-coloured, and both moustache and hair were of a light brown; not that dirty, indescribable shade, but the tint which is decided, rich, and has gleams of reddish gold, in the sun, running through it. For a woman, Lady Everilda was tall, and the young man was about half a head taller, and was slight in figure, but broad-shouldered.

‘I have only just returned from Switzerland. Took my sister Amelia there, you know; deposited her with those friends of hers—the Turnors,’ he said, in reply to the elder lady’s questioning.

‘On the whole, you have not honoured your native land much lately,’ she resumed. ‘By the way, where are you staying, Peter?’

‘Well, I am staying here with the Fitz-Caliens. I only arrived to-day, and shall be here about five days.’

‘Now, couldn’t you come on to us after-

wards,' inquired Lady Everilda, 'unless you intend doing the season? I shall be delighted to see something of you. We shall be quite alone, Iris and I. But I know you liked a short spell of country life formerly, only you may have changed,' she added.

'I shall be charmed to come, Lady Everilda; indeed, had you not so kindly invited me, I should have made so bold as to have invited myself.' Here Lord Kenamere glanced admiringly at Iris, and the wily aunt was quick enough to perceive this. 'As for the season,' he continued, laughing merrily, 'I have been doing that, and have had quite enough of it, I can tell you. Those hot rooms are too much for me. I really can't stand them, and the whole thing bores me awfully. I like to be out of doors, don't you know. I fear I am not a society man, by any means.'

He laughed again, and the ring was hearty and pleasant. His voice, too, was manly, yet gentle, in tone: there was not that roughness and coarseness which are so prevalent in the voices of the male sex. Just then there appeared a girl, with flaming red tousled hair and a white, freckled visage; she was carrying a cup of coffee.

'Do have this!' she said to Lord Kenamere.

‘It is two shillings, but if I take a sip first, it will be five. Which shall it be?’ and she gazed up at him boldly with her hard, small, light-gray eyes.

‘You are most kind,’ responded the young man, with the faintest tinge of irony in his tone; ‘but, alas! I never drink either tea or coffee at this hour. Thank you very much, though;’ and he bowed slightly.

Nothing daunted, the charmer made a fresh effort.

‘Ah, but I am sure you smoke! Now, don’t you?’ and she gave him an arch look. ‘If you just come this way’—and she pointed in which direction—‘they have the most lovely cigars and cigarettes: cigars ten shillings each, and cigarettes five shillings each. Very cheap indeed, surely, at the price, although they are not so dear if you don’t wish me or another young lady to bite off the end first.’ Then she giggled and ogled him unblushingly.

‘Again I must thank you extremely,’ answered Peter, with a more pronounced shade of sarcasm; ‘but I regret to say that I seldom smoke, and never, by any chance, at this hour. So many thanks, all the same.’

With this he turned away to speak to Iris, who had been watching the girl with a decidedly

surprised expression. The aggressor, seeing that she was wasting her time and energy, left her prey with a cross pout, and elbowed her way with spiteful shoves and pushes through the crowded tent in search of an easier dupe, who would repay her for her trouble.

‘What a hateful young man!’ she muttered savagely as she went, and then she glanced back ferociously at Lord Kenamere and Iris, who were conversing happily together.

Peter was no new friend; Iris had known him since her childhood, and was delighted beyond measure at seeing him. He was five or six years her senior, and as his father’s place adjoined her father’s house, when Peter was home for his holidays they had seen a good deal of each other; also in the earlier days, before the boy went to school. The friendship had continued, because Peter had several times visited Lady Everilda, staying at her house for a week or so on end. He had always been fond of Iris, regarding her rather in the same way as a brother regards a sister; but to-day he found that he was thinking of her differently. For the last four years they had scarcely met; in fact, only once by chance at a station, for Peter had been round the world, and lately had simply done nothing else but travel.

As he looked upon Iris at this moment, he was struck by her exceeding beauty. She had marvellously improved since he last set eyes on her, not only in person, but in manner. He actually felt a curious sensation at his heart when he gazed at her, and when she spoke to him in those soft, thrilling, gentle tones. How pure and maidenly she seemed! he thought, such a lovable womanly being; and he contrasted her with the much up-to-date red-haired damsel, and with others of the same description whom he had met in London ballrooms. She with the flaming locks, and her tribe, appeared by comparison to be as staring peonies or as gaudy, flaunting dahlias, Iris resembling instead a fair lily-of-the-valley or woodland floweret. She attracted him strangely, and he felt he must see more of her. It was good to linger by her side—refreshing as dewy eve after the scorching heat of the day, or like a cooling shower after a march through a dry, burning desert.

‘Are you really going so soon?’ he inquired of Lady Everilda, who had just remarked to her niece that ‘she must manage to say good-bye to Mrs. Fitz-Calien before leaving, and she had no idea that it was already so late.’

‘Yes; I fear I cannot remain any longer. Even on a hot day, it grows damp and chilly

when the dew falls, and I catch cold so easily,' replied Lady Everilda.

Then she made her way towards the smart little hostess, and bid her adieu, whilst Iris did the same. They were delayed a moment, because Mr. Fitz-Calien had suddenly appeared on the scene, and now stood close to his wife, with a plaid shawl thrown over his shoulders and a skull-cap on his head instead of a hat. His countenance was wreathed in terrible smiles, and Iris involuntarily shuddered when she shook hands with him.

Lady Everilda congratulated him upon the great success of the bazaar.

'Vanity Fair—I call it Vanity Fair,' he mumbled, chuckling maliciously. 'The women want these affairs to show off their new gowns and bonnets—he, he, he! There are one or two in there who wouldn't look much if stripped of their fine feathers—he, he, he! Such frumps and frights I have seen! I expect my wife likes them as foils—he, he, he!'

'Percy, Percy, what are you saying?' remonstrated Mrs. Fitz-Calien.

'Oh, I know very well what I am saying, you little piece of frivolity,' he responded. 'Why, pray, have you decked yourself out in such a beautiful frock? Why does that

wonderful structure grace your vain little pate? Is all this for my edification? Goodness me! Am I a married man for nothing? I——'

Here Lady Everilda broke in; the situation was becoming unbearably awkward. Mrs. Fitz-Calien's face had grown scarlet; tears of vexation were actually welling up in her pretty eyes, and threatened to play havoc with her kohol-darkened lashes. There would be some tell-tale black streaks on the rosy cheeks if she did not take care.

'Charming afternoon it has been! Good-bye, dear Mrs. Fitz-Calien;' and her ladyship discreetly turned on her heel.

'Good-bye, dear child,' said the hostess, when Iris bade her farewell, and she looked at her wistfully as if she felt, at that instant, what a fearful wreck she had made of her own life, and trusted that the lovely girl would not do likewise.

Lord Kenamere escorted the ladies to their carriage.

'I think Mr. Fitz-Calien is a dreadful old man,' remarked Iris, as she walked between him and her aunt.

'I quite agree with you, Miss Amering, although, being my host, it is wrong of me to say anything to his disparagement; but,

indeed, it is most painful to be compelled to hear the things he says to his wife ; she gets so upset by them, and one can't wonder at it.'

'Marriage is a decided failure there, poor little woman!' chimed in Lady Everilda. 'She hadn't a sixpence of her own, but I should say she must regret having allied herself to such an old monster. I felt just now that I could have given him a good piece of my mind. He surely must be wrong in the upper story—insulting person!'

'Very hard lines for her, certainly. Perhaps he isn't quite right—most charitable construction of his behaviour,' echoed Peter.

Then Lady Everilda wished him *au revoir*, and when Iris gave him her hand, and smiled at him with her frank, true eyes, he blushed slightly. He assisted the ladies into the victoria, and they both smiled and bowed as they drove off, whilst he lifted his hat with a protracted and deferential sweep. So Lord Kenamere returned to the bazaar, his thoughts meanwhile travelling along the picturesque country lane with Iris ; whereas she, the maiden, said to herself : 'Lord Kenamere is very pleasant ; he has charming manners. Yes ; I always thought he was nice.' But she went no farther ; she was still fancy-free.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STORM.

Two days had elapsed since the bazaar—nice quiet, sunshiny summer days—which Iris had peacefully enjoyed. In spite of her aunt's censorious strictures, it could not be truthfully said that the girl was of an idle disposition, for she was always occupied in some way. It was most natural that she should not care to peruse dry essays and treatises, for she was by no means a blue-stocking ; but she loved historical romances and interesting biographies, she also thoroughly enjoyed a good novel, and what harm was there in that ? She was brimming over with real sentiment ; her nature was very spiritual, and her favourite writer was Marie Corelli. She was, perhaps, one of those women who are more clever with their fingers than with their brains, for although by no means deficient in intelligence, still she was not hard-headed. Mathematics, geometry, and the exact sciences generally, did not appeal to her ; it was not in her line either to study or understand them. But she adored music, drawing, and painting, in fact, although she never could have excelled in any branch in

particular. She was no genius, but just a wholesome, sensible girl, with a mind a shade profounder than the average, and an affectionate, loyal heart. She would not have made an artist, but she might have been a first-rate milliner, for she trimmed hats and bonnets to perfection, and it amused her to do so. She was never cross or sulky, and this was much to her credit, for Lady Everilda was often enough to try a saint.

‘I feel I should like a nice long walk, aunt,’ she said on that afternoon; it was the third day after the fête, and yet since then Lady Everilda’s long nose had not been outside the door.

There was not a breeze stirring; it was unusually close. The drawing-room window was open, but all the same the atmosphere was stifling, and pervaded with the acrid odour of marguerites, mingled with the overpowering scent of the magnolia, a flower to which her ladyship was extremely partial, and which she always insisted upon having near her when possible. Altogether, the tables and mantelpiece were too burdened with cut flowers, which might have been replaced with advantage by growing plants, so mused Iris; but she was aware that her aunt did not agree with her, so that, as she

didn't feel inclined to be snubbed, she kept her thoughts to herself.

'Go out, my dear, by all means, although I must say that your energy astonishes me, for how in the world can you care to walk in this insufferable heat? I simply cannot move. Do you know, that bazaar has quite knocked me up. I have felt fatigued ever since; even Keane noticed how pale I looked.'

As Lady Everilda's face was always the colour of suet, and never varied in tint, except to flush occasionally in an almost imperceptible way from annoyance, the maid's remark must have been forced from her lips by her mistress's wearying, unceasing complaining and constant inquiries as to the state of her complexion. 'You don't think I look at all yellow, do you, Keane?' she would ask anxiously; then: 'Is it the mirror, or am I in reality rather green to-day?' or, 'Is it my imagination, or have I a small wrinkle on my forehead? I never observed it before.' And so on, and so on, incessantly, as if it mattered whether her physiognomy were the colour of a Red Indian, excepting to her vain self, for who cared?

Iris was perfectly accustomed to this little fad of her aunt's. The absorbing interest in the pallid, faded complexion struck her as comically

sad ; but sometimes Iris forgot the funny element, and saw only the pathos of it. ' Poor lonely old maid ! why was she so silly ? Was it because once long ago an admiring young lover had whispered that her complexion was dazzlingly fair ? What had become of him ? Had he proved unfaithful ? had he died ? or was he too poor, and had unkind relations driven him away from her side ? ' Iris felt sorry then, and thought kindly of the poor lady. Yes ; surely there must have been some tragedy, for the Lady Everilda Dacre could not have been otherwise than handsome in her youth, in a hard, statuesque way. She must have possessed a Minerva- or Juno-like beauty, rather ; everything about her was on too large a scale to please a very refined taste.

' Dear aunt,' replied Iris, ' I really do not see that you are paler than usual. Perhaps if you were to take a nap it might do you good and rest you ; as for me, I require a certain amount of exercise, as you know. Then, as I do not ride on a bicycle——'

' A bicycle ! ' interrupted Lady Everilda ; ' I should think not, indeed : such a thing I would not permit. I consider it a most indelicate proceeding.'

' I have no wish to ride one, aunt. I believe

I am too much of a coward ; anyhow, I don't fancy it. When I tried Gladys Mayler's tricycle, I——'

' You tried that girl's tricycle !' broke in the other, with angry excitement. ' And pray when ? You never told me of this before. Really, Iris, you astonish me ! I wouldn't have believed that you could be so sly !'

' Indeed, Aunt Everilda,' answered the girl, with some indignation, ' it was simply that I forgot. The incident never crossed my mind till now. Why, it happened at least three months ago, when I spent the day with Gladys, and I was only on the thing about five minutes. I didn't care about riding it.'

Her aunt cooled down.

' Of course, as you tell me that it is all right. But, pray, never let me hear you allude to the subject again.' She closed her eyes, and added : ' I feel completely worn out : even your voice tires me. You are getting into a bad habit of talking so loud, Iris. It reminds me of one of those dreadful Americans.'

' I am sorry. I didn't know. I trust to find you are rested by the time I come back.' So saying in low tones, the girl left the room, followed by her faithful companion, Zulu.

It certainly was very warm, too warm to walk

in the dusty lanes or open fields ; for the sun beat down in a glorious hot blaze, in an unrelenting majesty of fierceness, out of a sky of the most intense azure. Beyond over the valley—for Snatchels stood on an eminence—was one dark, inky cloud to be seen in the firmament ; but Iris did not observe it, although, as she went, it lay immediately before her. The ground sloped gradually away in that direction until, over woodland and meadow, the earth and canopy of heaven met and kissed in the far distance.

To reach the cool shade, Iris was compelled to cross a glaring field, in which was not one tree to temper the heat and afford protection. This field divided the small grounds of Snatchels from the Screeling estate, which lay beneath. Those splendid forest trees which screened the Grange, and stretched their roots and branches onward, through and over acres and acres—these were deliciously inviting to-day, and Iris intended to enjoy a delightful saunter amongst fern, moss, wild-flowers, and leafy foliage.

The poor pug, even, was pleased to reach the shadowy woods. He was panting from the heat ; his tongue protruded. Ah, joy ! here rippled a clear, limpid brook, to the edge of which puggy at once waddled, whilst his fond

mistress looked on with sympathy as he quenched his thirst.

Iris was a graceful walker. She moved forward with a gliding motion, and with a light, sylph-like tread down the glade, brushing the bracken and wild-rose bushes with the skirt of her neat little shepherd's-plaid cotton gown. On her head was a white, shady, coarse straw hat, simply trimmed with white ribbon and field-flowers. She wore no gloves, because she couldn't bear them, but one slim wrist was clasped by an old Indian bangle, and the other by a gold chain bracelet. Round her neck was a coquettishly-tied narrow pink ribbon, the small bow being almost in front, and her low lace collar was pinned with a diamond horse-shoe brooch, which had belonged to her mother. She carried a book, also, and a dark-blue silk parasol, but she did not require to hold it up in this beautiful shadowy wood.

The light played on the mossy turf. It came in soft, gleaming streaks through the thick, emerald-hued foliage from dear old Sol, who wished to show that he was up above by sending a glinting ray wherever he could find a space between the thick mass of crowding leaves and close branches.

Iris sang gaily to herself in a round, mellow,

soft voice as she walked. Presently, after she had gone some way, she sat down upon the trunk of a tree, which had been felled by the woodman's axe and left there. The ground was strewn with fir-cones, and the girl amused herself by throwing these to the little dog to fetch. She continued to make him run till he was tired and would fetch no longer ; then she opened her book and read, whilst Zulu curled himself up at her feet and snored, as pugs will.

How long she sat thus, she did not know ; but suddenly she heard a great clap of thunder, which made her start and look up ; then she perceived that it had grown very dark. Evidently the sun was hidden and the sky overcast. This, therefore, was the meaning of the tremendous heat.

A vivid flash of lightning lit up the obscurity, succeeded by another and another, each followed by a loud booming peal, which struck terror into her feminine soul. What should she do ? What a dreadful predicament ! Here she was, stranded quite a mile from home, in the heart of a dense wood. She knew, too, the danger of remaining in proximity to trees during a storm. She trembled ; the lightning almost blinded her. The little dog cowered by her side and whined piteously. He hid himself

under her petticoats, thinking so to find a safe refuge.

Iris put up her hands to her face to hide the horrid forked electric flashes from her eyes. Her womanly instinct also impelled her to take this precaution of shielding those eyes, and the pretty countenance from which they beamed. She offered up a silent prayer to the Almighty Maker of the universe, who held her life in His hands, to guard and defend her, and bring her safely out of this mortal danger. Great drops of rain began to fall, and Iris, who at first had been too alarmed to stir, bethought herself of moving homewards.

At that moment, just when, the few heralding drops having descended, the rain came down in a thick drenching torrent, whilst the storm raged in awful appalling grandeur, a man appeared before her—a man whom she had never before seen. It was Edmund Puckle, who was returning from a visit to the enchanting barmaid.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said, lifting his hat with one hand, whilst with the other he clutched a large umbrella, which he was holding well over his head—‘I beg your pardon, madam, but you will get wet to the skin ; and I don’t like to frighten you, but, indeed, it is hardly

prudent to remain in these woods. Our house is quite close. Do come and take shelter till the storm is over! My name is Edmund Puckle. I am staying with Mr. Christopher Perkyns at Screeling Grange. Screeling Grange is only a few yards distant from here.' He spoke with great respect.

Iris was so thoroughly terrified by the thunder and lightning, and perturbed by the idea of having to make her way home through the storm and deluge with only her wretched parasol to protect her, that the mere sight of a human being was encouraging. She was really half paralyzed with terror. Her cotton gown had already begun to feel uncomfortably damp, although the rain could not penetrate in its entire force, on account of the leafy screen. Certainly, this was no time for conventional qualms. She only hesitated for a second, wondering if she ought to accept the offer; then, reflecting that her aunt was acquainted with Mr. Perkyns, she took courage, and thought she would go to Screeling.

'You are very kind; I am Lady Everilda's niece, you know, from Snatchels. Perhaps you have heard Mr. Perkyns mention my aunt?'

'Most decidedly I have,' responded Edmund, speaking as if butter would not melt in his

capacious mouth. 'Now, Miss Amering, I am only too proud to think I have come to the rescue; I am certain your aunt would insist upon your taking refuge were she here; and although Screeling Grange is not mine, Mr. Perkyns would be enraged if I did not proffer you this small hospitality in his name—hospitality! dear me, no! what am I saying? You will honour him and me. Do let me persuade you, young lady; if you remain here, or attempt to make your way homewards, you may, and probably will, catch a fearful cold; pray, now, get under my umbrella; so—that's right'—as Iris did so. 'Then there's the poor pug; allow me;' and he lifted the small animal into his arms. 'Now, then, quick march;' and Iris found herself being literally marched off.

She felt it was wiser to put a bold face on the matter, and allow herself to be escorted to a sheltering roof by this chivalrous knight, as she thought he was, although she did not much care for his looks; but then she remembered that one ought not to 'judge by appearances,' and she was in too limp and moist a condition, and too terror-stricken by the thunderstorm, to think very much about the ex-priest's decidedly disagreeable bad expression.

They arrived at Screeling almost immedi-

ately; the pug squealed once during the journey thither.

‘Poor little thing! he caught his claw in my buttonhole,’ said Edmund.

In reality he had cruelly given the little creature a sly pinch. He had an evil nature in all conscience. Puckle talked incessantly until they entered the hall—trivial conversation about the neighbourhood, dances, and entertainments; in fact, he acted as if he were a barrister cross-questioning a witness.

Iris certainly felt very shy when she found herself inside the Grange; she began to wonder afresh if she had done right in going there. Then she looked through the window at the dense sheet of rain, and as she gazed there was a blinding flash of lurid lightning, whilst the instantaneously following burst of thunder shook the building. Could she have done otherwise under the circumstances? Assuredly not, she told herself; there was no room for doubt.

‘One moment, if you will sit down here;’ and Edmund, with a bow, ushered her into the drawing-room, and, leaving the door open behind him, left her. The next minute he returned, accompanied by Christopher. What an extraordinary position to be in, alone with

these two men! Iris felt herself blushing. Then she greeted her host in her natural manner; he coloured also.

‘I am so sorry to think of your being out in such weather,’ he said, stammering out the words and looking remarkably sheepish, ‘but glad, at the same time, to think that my friend Mr. Puckle should have come upon you and have brought you here. What a fortunate thing, to be sure, that you were so near the house!’ and he rubbed his hands together nervously, fidgeting besides from one foot to the other.

‘It was most kind of Mr. Puckle to take pity on me; so good of you, too, to give me shelter,’ replied Iris as collectedly as she was able, and with dignity. ‘I cannot imagine how I should have got home, I am so frightened of storms; and just see—listen how it is still raging!’ she added, as the room was fearfully illuminated, and there was another awful peal like the sound of a thousand roaring cannons.

‘Now, would you like my old housekeeper to dry your dress for you? Shall I send for her?’ inquired Christopher diffidently.

Iris glanced at her frock and felt it.

No; it was scarcely wet at all; besides, how could it be dried? She could decidedly

not divest herself of it, nor did she feel inclined to roast herself before a kitchen fire, turning round and round like a joint of meat on a spit.

‘Thank you very much,’ she answered simply, ‘but I think it is unnecessary. My gown is hardly damp; Mr. Puckle shielded me quite beautifully with his umbrella. And Zulu—see, he is also quite dry, thanks to him; Mr. Puckle carried him, you know.’

The dog was sitting on her knees, and Christopher gently patted his soft, sleek head.

‘Well, if you are quite sure about it, I won’t send for Mrs. Simcox; but you have only to say so, and she shall come at once. And you must have some tea or coffee. Which do you prefer, Miss Amering?’ he asked, with his best smile.

‘Oh, thank you, that is too much; I want neither,’ she responded rather quickly and nervously. ‘If you will just allow me to sit here for a short time, till the weather clears a little, I will make my way home,’ she added.

‘But indeed, Miss Amering, we could not possibly allow you to leave without partaking of some refreshment—could we, Perkyns?’ broke in Puckle, turning to Christopher. ‘Besides,’ he continued, ‘it is tea-time; you would miss

the tea or coffee, and we always take it ourselves. I shall order it immediately.'

'Yes ; please do,' said Christopher. 'Now, which beverage do you prefer, for sometimes we have one, sometimes the other ; bachelors are queer people, you know.'

He smiled and glanced at Iris.

'Well, if you insist,' she replied, thinking that it would be rude to refuse her hosts, who might consider her uncivil and ridiculously prudish, feeling, too, that she really needed the slight stimulant, 'and it is not a great trouble, I should like a cup of coffee ; but tea would do just as well,' she said.

Without waiting to hear any more, Edmund went off to the kitchen, for if he rang for Gulliver everything might come up wrong, and it would probably be a precious long time arriving, besides.

Christopher sat down at a respectful distance from his fair guest, and essayed his utmost to make himself agreeable. She found him rather heavy and tiresome ; but, nevertheless, she talked to him as pleasantly as she could, for she felt that she had every reason to be grateful to him, and had she not been affable she would have been a detestable young woman. To nearly every remark Iris made, her host ex-

claimed, 'Oh, indeed,' or 'Really,' and do what he would, he could find no other subject than the state of the weather in the past, present, and future. He harped and harped upon it till it was worn threadbare, and then he began about the pug. Iris presently inquired whether he had travelled much.

'Indeed, yes,' he replied.

Then there was a dead silence.

'To what countries have you been?'

'Oh, to most.'

Another awkward pause.

'I have been chiefly in Africa,' said Christopher huskily at last, for he was shaking in his shoes before this slip of a girl, who sat there quietly regarding him with her deep starry orbs.

'Did you like it?' she queried.

'Yes; I liked it fairly well. You see, I returned richer than I went.'

He smiled nervously, his lips quivered.

'It must be pleasant to be rich, for one can do so much good with money,' hazarded Iris dreamily.

Christopher felt a sharp stabbing prick of shame; he was totally unprepared for this answer, which was so simply given.

'I fear that idea has not struck me,' he stam-

mered, with a sensation that before this angelic being he must be honest or die.

Iris gazed at him wonderingly, as if to read his inmost thoughts, the very depths of his soul.

‘You are joking, I know,’ she said slowly, and she believed that he was.

‘No, indeed,’ he replied with a catch in his breath. ‘I am selfish, Miss Amering ; but I assure you,’ he continued gravely, ‘that never until this moment have I realized the full extent of my wretched imperfection.’

He looked at her earnestly, even pleadingly, as if for mercy. Iris was conscious of some confusion. She was uncertain if she had not taken too much upon herself, for on a sudden it dawned upon her that she had preached at the man. Carried away by her strong convictions and enthusiasm, she had said more than she intended—she had sat in judgment.

There was a pause of a few seconds. The only sound was the ticking of the clock. Then Iris collected her thoughts.

‘Forgive me,’ she said quietly ; ‘I did not mean to be personal. I know nothing of your life, but doubtless you have performed many, many an act of disinterested kindness. When I spoke’—she hesitated, and proceeded with

a slight tremor in her voice—‘ I was thinking of myself alone. I wish, oh, so often ! that I could do more. I see all the misery of the world, the sadness, the cruelty, and I can do so little to help ; nothing—nothing, in fact, so that the magnitude of what remains overpowers me.’

Iris had clasped her hands tightly ; her features seemed irradiated by some glorious inner light, and when she ceased speaking, Christopher could but fix his eyes upon her, lost in admiration at the mystical strength and beauty of her character, and also of her pure, gentle, womanly face. His heart beat loudly—faster than ever. He was lost, submerged in the rush of his emotions ; the tide increased, depriving him altogether of speech. Alas ! he was struck dumb just when he longed for words, for eloquent language—just when his most ardent desire was to let Iris know that in his nature, hidden away, but still there, flickered a spark of latent nobility and generosity, which she, with her magic spirit-touch, could fan into a bright flame. Her soft, candid eyes rested upon him as if in inquiry ; he would have given almost everything he possessed to be able to find his tongue, and not appear just like a clownish boor : but it was impossible ; his brain seemed

to reel, and every thought he had ever had took wings.

It was quite a relief when Edmund Puckle returned, bearing a tray on which was an embossed silver coffee-pot, and all the rest of the paraphernalia, whilst Gulliver followed, carrying a fine plum-cake on a plate in one hand, and in the other a plate of neatly-cut brown and white bread and butter. The silver might with advantage have been given a little extra polish, for it was as dull as the electro or Britannia metal seen at hotels and lodging-houses, otherwise the repast itself looked dainty and appetizing enough.

‘But fancy your bringing in the things in this way; you make me feel quite ashamed to think I am the cause of so much trouble,’ exclaimed Iris with a vivid and becoming blush.

‘My dear young lady, it is a real pleasure, I assure you,’ replied Edmund depreciatively. ‘It is a *bonâ-fide* treat to me. Shall I be taking too much upon myself if I pour out the coffee?’ he inquired, turning to the host.

‘It is the very least you can do, my dear fellow, after having brought it in,’ laughed Christopher; he felt more confidence now that his friend was once more present to inspire him with courage and to back him up.

The ex-priest at once commenced operations. He had set down the tray, perhaps from inadvertence, in a manner which obliged him to turn his back upon the others. He wheeled suddenly round and handed a cup, which was three-quarters full of the liquid, to Iris.

‘Do you take milk and sugar?’ he inquired.

‘If you please ; I am rather a sweet tooth. Oh, two are quite enough, thanks’—as Edmund, to save her trouble, having already inserted two lumps, pulled out yet another from the basin.

‘Bread-and-butter first. Isn’t that what the nurses say ?’ he observed jocosely.

They were quite a merry trio. By-and-by Christopher noticed that Iris had finished her coffee.

‘Now you must have another cup,’ he insisted.

‘Thank you. Yes ; I won’t say no. It is the most excellent coffee I have ever——’ But her voice, which had been gradually growing weaker and weaker as the words fell from her lips, all at once ended in a whisper. The sentence was never terminated ; her eyes closed, her head fell back on her chair, her arms dropped limply down, and the porcelain cup she was holding slipped out of her hand, and,

falling to the ground, was smashed into fragments.

Christopher's eyes were almost starting out of his head ; he took one step forward and gazed at Iris perfectly aghast. Edmund, on the contrary, stood calmly surveying her with a glittering leer, which was shot wickedly in her direction through his half-opened lids.

All at once a light seemed to dawn upon Christopher ; he turned and confronted his friend, bringing his fist heavily down upon the table at the same time, so that the crockery clattered.

'Wretch ! fiend !' he exclaimed, his eyes dilating with fury. 'You have for some evil purpose drugged the coffee.'

Edmund averted his face for an instant as if to collect his thoughts ; then he looked straight at Christopher with a superior expression of wisdom. He did not flinch or turn a hair, neither did he lose his temper.

'Do not be a fool, Perkyns, nor accuse me unjustly,' he responded in his usual rough tone. 'Truly, I did put something into Miss Amering's cup, but it is absolutely harmless. Far be it from me,' he continued grandiloquently, 'to breathe so much as a thought of evil towards one so innocent and charming. She will remain

in a delicious trance for the space of exactly an hour and a half ; then she will wake.'

'How could you do such a thing? How dared you? and wherefore?'

'“The end justifies the means” is my creed!’ hissed the other. Then he continued carelessly: ‘Have our Luciferian services been so successful? Tell me! Only in the first would the spirits manifest themselves. In the two last we had, we were granted no apparitions, only cold blasts of wind, sighs, and half-formed words, which were too indistinct for us to catch. You remember what I confided to you about an innocent maiden? Here she is. Now let us see what her influence will be in the temple of Lucifer. I swear to you’—as Christopher made as if he would have none of it—‘I swear to you that not a hair of her head shall be harmed; no injury shall befall her! On the contrary, she will dream sweetly, awake refreshed, and will think she has been asleep and in heaven. You shall remain as guard over her; therefore you will know that all is right. She might just as well sleep in the study as here. Don’t you see that? Now, be sensible, Christopher; you know nothing about these things.’

‘But it is a shameful, ungentlemanly pro-

ceeding, and I respect this girl as if she were an angel. How could you? how could you?' And he began to pace up and down the room with one hand pressed against his brow. 'Won't some water sprinkled over her bring her round?' he asked.

'No, no, no! it might cause her to remain in trance for ever so much longer. Look here;' and a brilliant idea flashed into his brain. He lowered his voice, and, approaching Christopher, whispered into his ear: 'Unless we take her into the black study and put her in charge of the spirits, we shall endanger her life—her precious life, I tell you! And, Christopher, I am a man of the world. You cannot hide or disguise your passionate feelings from me. You are madly in love with Iris Amering!'

Christopher started as if he had been stung. 'Say not a word more of that,' he said hoarsely, 'but about the other—her life! Swear on your honour that you are speaking the truth! For her sweet life's sake, must she be in the company of spirits?'

'She must, on my sacred honour! I swear it!' replied Edmund, raising his eyes to the ceiling and clasping his sinful hands. 'It is an occult law, unknown to you. Good spirits will surround her immediately we invoke

Lucifer ; inert beings, doubtless, but capable of comprehending that feeble girl-soul. Spirits she must have near her now !' he exclaimed in stentorian tones ; then, lowering them, he continued : ' If you insist upon Miss Amering remaining where she is, you do so at your own peril ; for so, if her soul leaves her body, it will be you that are guilty, for I warned you !'

He ceased. His face had grown an almost imperceptible shade paler, and the muscles of his mouth twitched convulsively ; the veins in his forehead stood out ; his chest heaved, and he clenched his hands so tightly that the nails hurt the palms. Truly he was in an agony of suspense. Would he gain his ends ? Would Christopher permit him to achieve this thing ?

For many long months had the dearest wish of Edmund's heart been to find a maiden who would consent to be present during the rites. He ardently longed to witness the wondrous manifestations of which he had heard ; and now, if only his partner would not hinder him, this desire could be accomplished.

But what if Christopher refused ? Then would Edmund for ever be stamped in his eyes as liar, with a large capital L, for Iris would recover her senses and come out of her trance as well in one room as the other.

The ex-priest had lied like a trooper ; and if his friend discovered that he had done so, he—Edmund—would most certainly be disgraced, and given to understand that his companionship was no more needed : so would he most assuredly lose his comfortable berth and his thickly-buttered bread.

Then Christopher's voice shook with emotion.

'As you declare that her life is endangered, let it be as you say,' he said ; 'only make haste. Each moment of delay must surely be harmful, and retard the awakening. She shall be under my own watchful care. I will carry her.' So saying, he gently lifted Iris out of the chair, and bore her with the greatest gentleness in his strong arms to the black study.

Edmund followed. He had uttered a big sigh of relief when the words fell from his patron's lips ; and now he was clapping his hands softly, smiling sardonically, and walking with a jaunty step that was almost a dance.

'Take her into the red room !' he exclaimed. 'She must be placed before the altar. Wait a second, and I will wheel in a couch and light up.'

The shutters were barred, so that not a beam of day could enter. In less than five minutes the red lamp and candelabra were alight, and

Iris was upon the sofa close to the altar. Christopher placed her most respectfully on it himself, and till then he had held her as if she had been a valuable china ornament, fearful even of crushing her gown. How temptingly near him were those sweet lips, the closed, darkly-fringed white lids! The burnished hair waved in bewitching disorder about his shoulders. Might he kiss one tress? No. With a sublime effort he managed to command himself. He was too manly to take the slightest mean advantage, to snatch what was not given—she was too sweetly virginal and holy to his mind; and although his tiny meagre caress would have been prompted by the best feelings of which he was capable—for all that was best and noblest in his being went out to her—still, he would refrain, for the action would even so be unworthy.

Christopher Perkyns of the year 1896 was hardly the same as in the year 1895. A glance from a sweet innocent eye had worked a transformation, and raised him one tiny degree nearer heaven.

So Iris lay like a lovely delicate flower, the image of her namesake, upon the couch, and by her stood Christopher as a faithful watch-dog.

Edmund knelt before the altar, silently in-

voking Satan. Presently he rose to his feet ; he poured some essence and threw a quantity of powder into the crucible, and as the stuff ignited, he wildly stretched out his arms, and cried :

‘ Lucifer, hear me ! Exhibit both power and majesty ! Manifest the superior strength of evil, the inferior power of that which is called good, when weakness, impotence, were truer designations ! Hear me, O Satan, Prince of Darkness ! Let me behold thy full magnificence ! Thy servant calls ! Hear, Lucifer, and answer !’ Then he began to extinguish the candles.

‘ For mercy’s sake, Edmund, stop !’ exclaimed Christopher. ‘ We cannot leave the girl in darkness ; I will not allow it !’ he added with emphasis.

‘ These must be extinguished,’ was Puckle’s determined, rough answer. ‘ But if you won’t permit this girl to remain in the dark, fetch the red lamp ; that can be placed on the altar, if you choose,’ he said ironically.

‘ I cannot leave her a second alone with you. Be so kind as to fetch it yourself,’ was Christopher’s reply.

‘ Suspicious cur !’ muttered Edmund under his breath ; then aloud : ‘ You have no reason to mistrust me ; but I suppose I must make every allowance for the state of your feelings’

(the priest had guessed his patron's secret: he knew he loved Iris), 'and not take offence, for you are hardly rational. I will fetch the lamp and light the extra one, which is ready in there in case of an emergency.'

So saying, he strode out, bearing the brasier, and returned immediately with the dim light, which he placed upon the altar. Then he went again into the black study, with Christopher at his heels.

'Do you mind drawing the *portière*?' said Edmund.

His friend drew it swiftly across, and Iris Amering was concealed from view. She reposed in lonely solitude before the awful crape-draped altar, whilst the painted skull and cross-bones loomed grimly on the wall above her.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ANGELIC VISITANT.

'CONCENTRATE your thoughts, place them entirely upon these rites; desire with fervour that Lucifer may deign to manifest himself or send some high emissary,' said Edmund impressively as he drew the usual fiery circle

around the smoking brasier with his long, curious, mystic wand.

Then he muttered some words in a strange tongue, and made passes through the ascending pillar of blue misty vapour. Almost immediately a rushing sound was heard, and an icy wind blew across the apartment. The air grew full of indistinct words which crowded on, like the distant babble of a thronging, seething multitude. Thicker and faster they came; voices seemed to rise and fall in sharp dispute, yet so veiled that all was, as it were, wrapped in a dense haze.

Christopher shuddered. It was horrible; he seemed to be surrounded by hundreds of gibbering lunatics, who whispered inaudibly, detestably into his ears. There was a sense of malignity in the air; he felt himself to be merged in an atmosphere of iniquity. Was he awake? he asked, or had all his bad dreams united to form one awful blood-curdling nightmare? Wicked eyes appeared to leer and glare at him out of the semi-obscurity; then suddenly there was a fearful crash, and, lo! the brasier had been broken in twain by some invisible force, the fiery circle was at the same time extinguished, and the remains of the smoking incense stuff fell upon the marble,

burst into a quivering blue flame, and then died out. Instantaneously the air grew still, and following on the terrific noise was the most complete silence — like the stillness of death. The hush was so profound that it could almost have been heard ; it endured but for a moment, and then out of it came the sweetest, the purest-toned voice that can be imagined, too pure to be mortal ; it rang out like a clear bell :

‘Oh, deluded mortals,’ it said, ‘cease your wickedness ; the crucible is broken, because we, the denizens of higher spheres, wish to demonstrate to you the power which is given us over evil. Sin is but the result of woeful ignorance, and causes us bitterly to weep. Ah, wretched men ! little do you understand or know how your evil deeds sadden what else would be to us the most transcendent bliss : for how, think you, can we, with our spirits brimming over with love, be happy, when we look down upon the sorrowful star which is at present your home, and witness all the unnecessary pain and misery that you cause ? Can we tarry in our bright world and not seek to alleviate the suffering ? Can love be thus selfish ? Oh no ! Then, what, think you, must be our feelings and sensations when we find wretched souls so sub-

merged in an ocean of vileness, that, preferring their slough of despond, they turn a deaf ear to us their guardians and guides? Ah, what pangs we feel when compelled to witness pain, and sorrow and crime that we cannot avert!

There was a pause. Edmund seemed as if turned to stone; he gazed immovably before him. Christopher's head was bowed in shame. Just then the sable velvet *portière* was drawn swiftly aside, and revealed the sleeping form of Iris, whilst immediately over her there appeared, as if suspended in the atmosphere, a globe of white light, brilliant, flawless, dazzlingly pure and luminous. Then the voice continued:

'Christopher, I address you because you are not so blackened and steeped in evil as is your unhappy friend. Let him repent; he has sinned darkly, but there is hope—hope for all. The whiteness of the spirit must shine out at last, but the return journey from wickedness is bitterly hard; let Edmund, then, be quick to place his foot on the right path. And now, Christopher. Your name alone should make you blush to do evil. Dare you with such a name to stain and soil your soul? This once you are permitted to hear my voice—the voice of your spirit-guide—but never, never again till I

meet you on that day when you for ever leave your earthly casket ; for, mind you, your body is not you : it is merely your spirit's shrine ; through it does your soul act. All have dual souls, a heavenly and an earthly : the latter dies with the body, and, unfortunately, you have followed its guidance in preference to that of your Divine part. Listen to my timely warning, and turn over a new leaf. The air of this room is saturated with evil ; it was with difficulty that I could make my way to you through the murky waves of atmosphere. You cannot see me, your eyes are too gross ; my spirit-light only are you able to behold. Were it not for the agency, the lovely angelic mediumship, of that sweet, pure, feminine being lying yonder, I could not have spoken with you. Why have you attempted to worship the Prince of Darkness ? Think you, in your blunder, that he indeed exists as a personality set in rivalry to the All-Loving, All-Wise Spirit who rules the universe, and who sends ministers of light to your dark planet ? Know, O ignorant, blaspheming mortal, that there is no devil except the devil in your own soul. True, when your evil, impious prayers are breathed out to a Satanic Majesty, bad undeveloped spirits rush to you through the winds in response—unpro-

gressed souls of men, who, steeped in crime, having died in sin, hover in the atmosphere of earth : sometimes for many, many years, restless, miserable. So they come to you, and, being unrepentant, delight in your sins. One may even appear like unto your pictured devils, or he may seem so, owing to your fevered imaginations ; in fact, such is the insane conceit of many wretched unhappy souls, that it is quite possible that some spirit, having the power of manifesting himself to you, for sport occasionally calls himself Lucifer, Prince of the Devils. Like to like is a law. Live worthily, and you will attract the denizens of light, and reach nearer to them. Call on them, and they will come to you ; do not sink lower, Christopher : endeavour to rise, and perchance, even if my voice cannot pierce the gloom sufficiently to make itself heard, you may yet, whilst on earth, be able to catch a fleeting spirit-whisper from the fair summer land, and have a glimpse of that glorious happy country.'

Then the voice ceased, and there was a burst of such heavenly music that Christopher fell on his knees in prayer. The melody floated through the air, and meanwhile the lovely electric spirit-globe gradually faded in radiance, till at last it was no more seen, and when it had

quite vanished, the last strain of that angelic music died away in the distance.

For an indefinable space of time neither man could put his thoughts or feelings into speech ; each lingered silently there. Christopher had risen to his feet, and remained fixed to the spot in a state of complete bewilderment. Edmund scowled ; the unexpected had occurred. In his wildest dreams it had never dimly dawned upon him that, owing to the influence of virtue, of innate purity, an angelic spirit would thus descend to censure him and thrust the knowledge of his vileness before his eyes. He was perfectly and absolutely untouched by the message, wholly impenitent ; the heavenly discourse had but aroused his ire. He gnashed his teeth savagely, and knew only a sensation of the most excessively passionate hate against that starry one, intensified in fierceness because the awful blackness of his own soul grew denser in comparison with the pure, radiant angel spirit. But his mighty hatred embraced the whole world just then ; he felt hostile towards every creature that breathed—with the sun, too, and the azure sky, with the emerald carpet beneath : he was at war with all. How he loathed Christopher, and more especially Iris ! for it was she who had caused this thing to befall

him. He was snared in his own meshes. He loved the darkness that resembled his perverted nature; so had he devoted himself to the service of the devil. He had worshipped that evil spirit instead of his Creator, believing that he who reigned in hell was omnipotent; and, behold, the visitant from above had said that this personality was non-existent, a mere myth, the only real devil being the sinful passions of man.

Edmund was compelled to own that if this were so, then must his whole cherished hopes, with the creed of a lifetime, totter, crumble, and fall in ruin about his head. To Satan had he looked for aid; on him had he leant for firm, secure support; and now, lo! he had been blown away like a soap-bubble, becoming all at once as unsubstantial as that vacuous spherical construction. His mind had indeed sustained a severe shock, and he was in that state which borders upon insanity; he was hovering on the verge of it, and whether he could retain his equilibrium was the question.

Christopher recovered himself first; regretfully did he tear off the veil of holy quietude and elevating self-communion in which he had been shrouded. Since the advent of that pure angel, he seemed to have been utterly raised

above things of sense. It was an effort to draw his soul back to earth ; his first waking thoughts, as it were, went out to Iris. Not that she had been absent from his mind—oh no ; but he had forgotten her condition, the strange circumstance of her present abiding under his roof, and his soul ecstatically wavered on the confines of the unseen and spiritual. He sighed softly, then spoke.

‘Surely we must conduct Miss Amering back to the drawing-room,’ he said, turning to Edmund.

‘I suppose so—yes,’ replied the other in even rougher tones than was his wont.

Christopher looked at him curiously by the light of the red lamp as he swiftly entered the further room. Edmund’s expression was terrific as he stood waiting there as if glued to the spot. Christopher was almost alarmed at his odd appearance, but his thoughts were now fully centred upon Iris and all that concerned her. Gently he raised her from the couch, and bore her rapidly, without a moment’s hesitation, into the drawing-room. He placed her in the chair upon which she was sitting when the drug took effect. Indeed, his action had not been too prompt ; one second’s delay, and he would have been in a dilemma, from which he could hardly

have extricated himself. For Iris stirred and opened her eyes. She then sat upright, and gazed around her in a wondering way. She blinked her lids, and, apparently half dazed, said :

‘Where am I? What has happened?’

Then her eyes fell upon Christopher, and at that instant she remembered. The sight of him brought complete consciousness, and a good deal of agitation in its train. Had she fainted or slept? She could not tell; but, anyhow, the situation was fearfully embarrassing; her temples throbbed painfully, and her throat felt parched. Altogether, the extraordinary predicament in which she found herself, with an aching head besides, caused her confusion and misery—she was completely unnerved, and no marvel. Hot tears welled up into her eyes as she again asked :

‘What has happened to me?’

Christopher had until now been unable to find his voice. He was overwhelmed with conflicting emotions, and had also to collect his thoughts, for he hardly knew how to answer the fair interrogator; he felt awkward, shame-faced, and sheepish; besides, to save himself from utter destruction, he must perforce frame a lie. He reflected for half a second; then he

said in a blundering way, whilst his countenance grew purple and his eyes were riveted on the pattern of the carpet :

‘ You fainted, Miss Amering ; must have been the storm—fright, don’t you know. I am so sorry that you——’

Iris broke in with :

‘ How very, very strange ! I have never fainted in my life before. Did the faint last long ?’

There were sobs in her voice. Christopher was obliged to look up ; he couldn’t stand before her like a criminal. What must she think of him ? Yet in truth he felt most guilty.

‘ It is strange,’ he answered slowly ; ‘ it distresses me more than I can say to see you so upset about it. Tell me, Miss Amering,’ he pleaded with earnestness, ‘ what can I do—what can I get you ? We men are such utter dolts in these emergencies. May I fetch you a little brandy ? Wouldn’t that revive you, don’t you think ?’

‘ No, no, no !’ she said, endeavouring to keep back the tiresome tears which forced themselves up unbidden, and wiping her lovely eyes with her dainty scented, gossamer-like handkerchief. ‘ I must go home at once, Mr. Perkyns ;’ and she rose from her seat. ‘ What will Aunt Everilda think ? She will be quite alarmed at

my having stayed out so long, for I always return in time for tea ; she will imagine all kinds of things—that I have been killed by lightning or something. Do you mind telling me the time ? It must be getting late.'

Christopher looked at his watch ; it was exactly a quarter-past six, and he was aware that Iris had been in a trance for the space of an hour and twenty-five minutes, and he could not disguise the fact from her. But there was no help for it. So reluctantly he answered her question.

'How dreadful! how dreadful!' she cried, as the colour faded from her cheeks, whilst her whole sweet face appeared haggard and drawn ; 'to think that I should have been unconscious so long, and I assure you that I did not know I was going to faint. I remember perfectly that, just when I was holding out my cup for some more coffee, my heart seemed suddenly to stop ; there was no warning, and when I first awoke I fancied I had been sleeping. But good-bye, Mr. Perkyns,' she said, putting out her hand. She had quite ceased weeping ; the tears had been just a primary outlet to her strained feelings. 'Good-bye ;' and she managed to smile. 'Thank you ever so much for your hospitality ; it only worries me so fearfully to think of the

trouble I have been—and—and of this dreadful incomprehensible attack.'

Iris grew very nervous, but managed to bring her sentence to a satisfactory close ; her eyes, however, had dropped—she felt as if she would like to sink into the ground.

Christopher's mind was in an unenviable condition. Conscience had never so pricked him for years ; his heart, too, was in a tumult. The girl was a witch : each word, each look of hers fettered the chains more closely around him. He was determined to accompany her to Snatchels ; he was not going to allow her to return alone.

The storm had passed away, also the rain, and the sun beamed once more out of a blue cloudless dome ; the rays just glinted through the central branches of the trees, for the hour of setting was creeping onwards.

'You must permit me to walk home with you, and to deliver you safely into your aunt's hands,' said Christopher respectfully, but firmly.

Iris thanked him modestly. She did not refuse the offer, for, in truth, she felt a good deal shaken, and the idea of a protecting cavalier through the sombre forest was far from unpleasant, seeing that it was getting late.

Poor Zulu's movements have not been recorded during all this time. Christopher had regaled him on bread-and-butter and milk whilst his mistress was sipping her coffee, and then when she became unconscious, and did not respond to his gentle demonstrations of doggy affection, he, somewhat fatigued by his long run, jumped up on a cushioned chair and comfortably curled himself up for a snooze, in which he had remained until Iris returned from the temple of Lucifer. Now he was refreshed, and so barked, wagging his tail incessantly in anticipation of some more outdoor exercise. Christopher took his hat and stick, and the three left the house.

'I have not said good-bye to Mr. Puckle, or thanked him. Will you kindly do so for me?' said Iris to her new friend. 'You see, he was not in the drawing-room,' she added.

'I will certainly give him your message, but he should not have gone out of the way,' responded Christopher.

The fresh air—for the atmosphere had deliciously cleared since the storm—seemed to revive the girl. She soon felt almost herself again, and the two chatted pleasantly until they reached her door. The chatting was more on her side, because her escort could find nothing

sufficiently interesting to tell Iris—at least, thoughts vital to him surged up, but he dared not utter them. Soft, endearing phrases trembled on the tip of his tongue, but he was constrained to smother them. He longed to whisper the passionate love that was consuming him—to implore Iris to be his wife; to assure her of an eternal fidelity, of an unswerving and constant submissive adoration. He longed to strain her to his breast, and to cover her from head to foot with kisses. His was a strong, virile, ardent nature, and very possibly, although he loved truly, his attachment might not have been altogether so constant and lasting after marriage as he imagined in the fervour of his impulsive passion.

He soared as far as his soul would permit; but there were some of his sex who were able to rise on the wings of a noble affection to still higher elevations. Neither did the strength of their great overmastering love lose by the idealizing tinge of refinement, which, although it certainly existed in Christopher's case, was yet present in a smaller degree in comparison. Also it must not be forgotten that Christopher's past life had been very, very far from morally perfect. He had earned the distinctive epithet of fast—fastest, indeed, amongst the fast—and

had not objected to be reckoned as one of the gayest Lotharios wherever he tarried.

According to his own ideas, he was a great admirer of the fair sex, but his admiration, so said his detractors, was not always to the advantage of the feminine half of creation. And now that for once he loved worthily and truly, oh, what would he not have given that the reckless, roistering, ignoble past might be blotted out!

Christopher stood on the threshold of Snatchels, fondly hoping that Iris would ask him in. This she did out of sheer civility, and he followed her into the august presence of Lady Everilda. The lady greeted him stiffly, and her glance swept sharply from him to her niece, as if in wonderment and ill-pleased inquiry.

'Oh, aunt!' began Iris. 'I——'

'What have you been doing?' interrupted Lady Everilda in shrill tones. 'I have been terribly alarmed. Fancy your having been caught in such a storm! I thought you might have gone to the village, and were probably taking shelter in a cottage; but, then, I couldn't be certain. I even feared that you had been struck by lightning. The horrid notion quite gave me a headache. I had to send for Keane

to bring me eau de Cologne and smelling-salts, and Keane told me I looked ghastly. How do I look now, Iris ?'

She paused in her rather disconnected, rapidly-uttered speech, and, placing her hand upon the girl's shoulder and posing her head in a photographic attitude, she awaited the verdict, which she trusted would be favourable, especially as Mr. Perkyns was there. So much had she been taken up with herself that she had forgotten to ask him to be seated.

Iris replied that she 'thought her aunt appeared rather anxious and tired,' and added that she regretted she had given her a fright.

Fairly satisfied with this reply, Lady Everilda sat down, and invited her guest to do likewise. She looked at him for some explanation of his presence ; but Iris, now that her aunt's personal appearance was disposed of, gave her own version of the afternoon's unpleasantly exciting, thrilling incidents, and thus relieved the miserable man from being obliged to relate an incoherent and sadly untruthful tale.

He just chimed in now and again like an echo ; and when, at length, his hostess appealed directly to him about 'the faint,' fixing her cold hard eyes intently upon his countenance meanwhile, Christopher braced himself up as if fighting

for dear life, and managed to speak quite glibly, with such an air of innocent candour, saying 'how he observed at once, when Miss Amering entered the room, that she looked so pale, evidently panic-stricken by the terrible storm, and how she fainted dead away, having meanwhile grown paler and paler as soon as she began to taste her coffee,' that Lady Everilda felt certain that he had nothing to hide from her, he seemed so plain-spoken and entirely honest.

'You forget, though, Mr. Perkyns,' put in Iris, 'that I had finished one cup. Mr. Puckle was just going to give me a second, when I felt so queer and went off.'

'Oh ah, just so! Yes; I forgot that, of course,' said Christopher, feeling at this slight correction as if he were under fire in an awful battle.

'It is so strange that until that moment I felt not the smallest inclination to faint. It is curious that I should have become so pale long before, for I did not know it,' she remarked to her aunt.

Christopher laughed rather uneasily, but this escaped Lady Everilda's notice. Her thoughts had reverted to the pallor of her own complexion, fortunately for him.

'You couldn't view your own countenance,

of course, Miss Amering,' he said ; then, laughing more naturally, he added : ' My drawing-room is only fit for bachelors—for our sex, I should say. If I had imagined I should be honoured by the presence of a lady, I would have had some nice large mirrors put up.'

' Indeed !' interposed Iris, straightening herself, and with the veriest shade of offended dignity. ' I am not one of those women who are for ever gazing at their own reflections ; so, personally, I am quite happy without looking-glasses.'

' If any lady might be pardoned for glancing at herself occasionally, it would be you,' ventured Christopher, lowering his voice so that her aunt should not hear ; for he was not far from Iris.

This ill-chosen remark, with which her admirer attempted to mollify her and win his way into her good graces, but increased Iris's displeasure ; she felt instinctively that he was not a perfect gentleman, and so shrank the more from him. She was grateful for his hospitality and for his kindness in escorting her home ; but any attempt at complimentary gallantry, verging on flirtation, on his part was to her simply intolerable ; his vulgarity came out then, and

made her recoil from him—made her, in fact, wince, and think him a common, detestable person. Poor Christopher! The compliments which had been so greedily swallowed by the ladies in whose society it had been his wont to find himself, now gave complete offence to this daughter of a noble race. She flushed to the roots of her hair, and neither finding an answer, nor deigning to endeavour to find one, she maintained a haughty silence.

Christopher Perkyns was too thick-headed and cross-grained to understand; he thought he had succeeded in pleasing her at last, and put the blushing down to maidenly coyness.

‘If it were the last word I should utter, it would be nothing but the truth, Miss Amering,’ he murmured.

‘Would you like tea, or some other refreshment, Mr. Perkyns?’ asked Lady Everilda, who, having thanked her guest for his goodness to her niece, considered that she had done her duty, and had purposely already made several rather marked pauses in her conversation, in order, if possible, to accelerate his departure.

At last he seemed to understand this new hint: he rose.

Iris had paid no attention to her guest's latest sally ; but feeling that ordinary civility demanded that she should say something, and not sit there like a mute, even though she was vexed, she uttered unthinkingly the first trivial thing that occurred to her mind :

‘ I have never before been inside Screeling Grange,’ was her remark.

‘ Being the first time, I trust it will not be the last,’ said Christopher, in his usual voice, and smiling as he went forward to bid his hostess adieu.

‘ Thank you again for taking such good care of my niece ; if you are passing this way on any Sunday afternoon, I shall be charmed to see you.’

She felt bound in common courtesy to say this, although she found that Christopher did not improve on further acquaintance.

‘ Thank you again also ; I am extremely obliged to you for all the trouble you have taken ’—this from Iris, as she gave the new friend—whom she disliked rather than liked—her hand. But she was not ungrateful, and must let him know it.

Christopher held her fingers a second longer than was absolutely necessary ; he pressed them slightly too, and gave her an impassioned look

straight in the eyes. Immediately there sprang up into those quiet, deep, liquid orbs into which he gazed, a flaming light of wounded, angry indignation ; then with a swift movement the girl turned away and averted her face entirely from this too familiarly impertinent admirer—an admirer who seemed to have only now come into being, for it had not flashed upon her brain until she reached Snatchels that he had placed himself in that position.

‘Ill-bred, horrid man!’ she said to herself; and after the door had closed upon him, she remarked to her aunt: ‘Mr. Christopher Perkyns has been kind and neighbourly ; but, for all that, I dislike him intensely. I consider that he is positively hateful.’

Lady Everilda laughed, if the curious genteel muffled notes in the treble key, which came forth as if under protest, could be called laughter. Then she purred out this sentence :

‘At any rate, it is far more satisfactory that you should hate Mr. Perkyns than that you should regard him—h’m’—here she coughed—‘with too sympathetic feelings.’ There was always a large tinge of the feline in Lady Everilda’s merriment ; a certain spite lay therein, flavouring joy like a pungent condiment. ‘But I have arrived at the conclusion,’

she paused, 'that in future you must not walk out alone, if you are inclined to faint; it is a most unsafe proceeding.'

'Dear aunt!' interposed Iris impulsively, 'how terrible it would be to drag a wretched maid at my heels; it would be simply unbearable; besides,' she continued, 'I have never fainted before—could it have been the uncanny atmosphere of that weird, ghostly house which affected me?' And her brown eyes grew dreamy and pensive as she mused.

'What nonsensical rubbish!' returned her aunt sharply. 'It was the storm, of course. If you object to walking with a maid, at least you must not wander so far from the house in this sultry weather. I ought to have known there was thunder in the air by my own sensations, and had I been wise I should not have allowed you to go out in the hottest time of the day. You really are exceedingly wilful, Iris; you had better go and lie down now, and you must take a hot bath this evening, and a dose of sal volatile would doubtless do you good.'

Iris strongly objected to medicines.

'Yes, I will take a hot bath; but I really can't swallow that sal volatile, Aunt Everilda. I assure you I feel as right as a trivet; I will

go up and read quietly in my room for a little—if you don't mind.'

So saying, she moved towards the door.

'You really use such very ugly words, Iris. I think it is perfectly dreadful to hear a well-bred girl talk slang,' said the aunt querulously.

'I must endeavour to mend my ways,' replied the girl, as with a happy rippling laugh she quitted the apartment for the peaceful repose of her own private sanctuary.

CHAPTER X.

THE DRAUGHT OF DEATH.

EDMUND PUCKLE intentionally remained in the gloom of the temple of Lucifer when Christopher bore Iris to the drawing-room and daylight. The wretched man felt that he must be alone, to recover what he termed 'his normal strength of mind and purpose.' First he unbarred the shutters and threw the windows wide open, for the darkness, combined with the want of air, seemed to unaccountably depress and suffocate him, whilst the sickly smell of the stuff which he had burned offended his olfactory nerves. Even when light and air were ad-

mitted he did not feel much better. He was not anxious on account of Iris ; he was positive that she would awake from her trance, and be none the worse ; he was also sure that Christopher, for his own sake, would be careful that the little episode should have a satisfactory ending. No ; his mental disturbance was entirely caused by the angelic visitant, and he attributed this sense of utter discomfort of mind and body to her baneful influence alone. She had set his brain on fire ; it appeared to be reeling, turning round and round, without so much as being able to catch at any fixed idea and hold it ; all was in wild chaos and confusion, whilst physically he was half benumbed, weakened and fatigued. To join the others until the disagreeable sensations passed was out of the question, for he felt that he could not take part in any ordinary conversation, like a rational human being.

Suddenly Edmund bethought him of the sleeping-draught which he had administered to Iris. ' Ah, there was the phial in his coat pocket ! ' He drew it out, without so much as troubling to look at it ; he simply put it to his mouth and swallowed the contents, for he had given Iris nearly half of the liquid, and rather more than half remained. But how queer this

tasted. He had taken the opiate before, and the flavour had been quite different ; this tasted extremely nasty—filthy, even. He examined the small flask and read the label. Then he uttered a terrible cry—a cry of despair—and a deadly pallor overspread his countenance, for he discovered that in his haste and abstraction he had, instead of the sleeping-draught, swallowed every drop of the burning essence which remained in the other phial, which, after having used before making his wicked incantations, he had thoughtlessly thrust into the pocket where he had placed that containing the opiate. Both bottles were of identical size and shape, so it was easy to make a mistake. The essence was a deadly poison, and Edmund had gulped down a sufficient quantity of it to have destroyed three strong men. Already it had commenced its relentless work. Edmund felt a cruel internal pain, as if a rat were gnawing at his vitals. He knew that his doom was irrevocably sealed ; nothing could save him. He desired to reach his room and die there, so he essayed to walk towards the door ; but he was only able to move two steps forward, and then his limbs utterly refused to obey his will. His legs literally gave under him, then seemed paralyzed to all use, yet racked and torn with suffering. He sank down on

the ground in agony. Every nerve and sinew through his frame was quivering as if pulled and nipped by hot pincers. His fingers became drawn, his fists clenched, and he was powerless to straighten his hands. His mouth was dragged awry, and his eyeballs almost forced out of their sockets. He attempted to shriek for help—although he knew that for him there was no help—but his voice was gone; there was but a horrible gurgling noise in his throat. A cold, damp sweat broke out on his forehead; his countenance was awful to behold, all distorted; and the skin—oh, horror!—was beginning to turn black. In his sore distress and torture, with the knowledge that in a few short moments he should be cast adrift on the boundless ocean of eternity, did a prayer to the Supreme Being rise up into the man's soul? Alas, no! Too long had he forgotten his Maker; he had never given so much as the shadow of a thought to that beneficent One. The years had come and gone without the faintest aspiration towards goodness and higher things; and now, in his dire extremity, when almost touching the shores of the Beyond, the name that he had forsaken and derided would not come to his remembrance. Lucifer, Satan, Devil—these names came rushing up-

wards, and with them a fearful gleam of light, which showed up their impotence ; and an inner voice told him in a terrible whisper that he should cry for succour to some Other. Was it the half-stifled voice of conscience ? But Who—Who was that Other ? He attempted to think, but he could not. Oh, the excruciating torture ! Surely he was being devoured by living flames ! He was held, too, as if in a vice ; he was incapable, now, even of changing his position on the ground ; his sides were as if encased in iron ; he could only just nod his head to and fro ; his swollen, blackened tongue protruded from his blue lips. And the agony became so intense that he fancied at length that some terrific engine was tearing his body asunder by bits. His mind was entirely giving way under the strain ; yet he could feel acutely—every physical sensation seemed to be intensified. So the dread moments flew quickly by, such myriads of pain-throbs in each that to the wretched mortal they seemed as hours.

And then at last, with a mighty effort, the soul wrenched itself free from the miserable tormented fleshly casket. The struggle was over, and the man's real self, sin-stained and degraded, fled out into the world of spirit. On

the floor, close to the sable-draped altar, lay what had once been known as Edmund Puckle. The body looked scarcely human, so twisted and disfigured was it ; head and heels were literally dragged together.

Christopher, having returned home, wondered where his friend could be, as Puckle was always in his company before dinner. Presently he began to think this continued absence strange, so he went into the hall, and called, ' Edmund ! Edmund ! ' But there was no answer. He waited for a little, and called again. Still no reply. Then Christopher recollected that his companion had remained behind in the temple of Lucifer. Could he still be there, making some new experiment ? He would see. In his usual brisk way, he pounded along with firm tread down the corridor and up the steps to the black study.

No, Edmund was not there ; but the *portière* which divided the two rooms was thrown back, and the red room was efficiently illuminated by the light which came from the unshuttered window ; for twilight had not yet crept on. The summer days were now very long. Christopher's gaze was fixed with inquiry upon the black huddled-up heap which lay before the altar. What was it ? He approached nearer—

he was on the spot ; then an exclamation of horror and alarm escaped from his lips, and all the colour faded from his face, leaving it weatherbeaten still, but bloodless. For an indefinable period he stood there completely dazed, staggered by the overpowering awfulness of the situation, and by the hideous, fearful appearance of the thing that he beheld. His eyes were widely open, riveted upon it. Then he pulled himself together, and the first crushing, stupefying thud of the shock having passed away, reason came to his aid. The cursory glance had been sufficient to apprise Christopher of the fact that Edmund was a corpse ; a touch but made assurance doubly sure. The forehead, the hands, were icy cold ; there was not the faintest flutter at the heart ; the fingers of the left hand tightly grasped a phial ; they were closed round it in a grip so fast that it was impossible to uncloset them ; the feet, too, had been almost bent double by agony.

Christopher with a hasty survey took in each detail. He was naturally sharp, and he at once realized the fact that the ex-priest had either poisoned himself wilfully or by inadvertence, and with this knowledge was forced upon him the frightful conviction that by this unfortunate

appalling accident or premeditated act, whichever it might be, he himself was placed in a most perilous position—a position fraught with grave jeopardy; ay, with formidable danger—for, doubtless, suspicion would fall upon him, and he might very possibly be arrested on a charge of murder. The idea filled him with sickening consternation. What should he do to obviate such a hideous contingency? Christopher called all his mental faculties into requisition, and it was not long before he discovered a way out of his difficulty—not a very proper one, indeed, or one that would have found favour with more scrupulous persons; but, then, he was a trifle less particular and conscientious than are many in some respects. He looked at his watch; it was exactly a quarter before eight. Yes, there was plenty of time for the accomplishment of his work. First he locked the doors of both rooms and pocketed the keys. Then he rushed off to Edmund's room like a lamplighter, and packed all his clothes, afterwards carefully searching wardrobe and drawers to make sure he had left nothing behind. He looked in every nook and corner, on every shelf and table. No, he had put in every single article; not a comb, razor, or button-hook remained—not a letter or envelope, even.

This done, the Master of Screeling descended, taking two steps at a time to the dining-room. Before sitting down to his solitary repast, he rang the bell violently, and Gulliver appeared in answer to the summons. The boy's hair was well plastered with oil, and his face shone, by means of the application of yellow soap, far more brightly than did the silver plate on the table.

'I want the dogcart in ten minutes, Gulliver,' said his master. 'Pray tell Mrs. Simcox that poor Mr. Puckle has been compelled to leave me at a moment's notice. He received some bad news from his relations, and will be unable to return here. He left early in the afternoon, and I am going to take his luggage and send it after him, as he begged me to do, having no time to see to his things himself.'

Christopher seemed very concerned, as indeed he was: the affair was no joke. Gulliver could scarcely suppress a grin; he was highly delighted to hear that Edmund, whom he heartily detested, had gone away for good and all.

'Oh, indeed, sir,' he replied, jerking the words out spasmodically.

'Well, please see about the cart at once; look sharp, now. And don't forget to give my message to Mrs. Simcox.'

‘Very good, sir,’ said the boy; and he shuffled out of the room sideways, like a crab.

Christopher made a pretence of eating and drinking; he was too much disturbed in his mind to do either. Then he went out by the garden entrance, and, slinking round to the tool-shed, he possessed himself of a pickaxe and shovel, besides two sacks, one large, the other smaller. Into the latter he thrust the tools, and tied them firmly at both ends with strong string. Quickly he made his way to the house, armed with the sack and package, when, finding that the cart was already at the door, and Gulliver standing at the meek horse’s head, he poked his odd burden under the seat; then, mounting into the vehicle and taking the reins, he bade Gulliver be quick and fetch down Mr. Puckle’s portmanteau and bag.

The boy soon returned with them, and no sooner were they in the cart than Christopher drove off. But he did not proceed very far; he just went down the carriage-drive, and, coming to a halt, sprang out of the vehicle, lugging the baggage after him. Although it was hardly necessary, the equine specimen being so quiet, he twisted the reins round the rusty iron railing which divided the drive from the

wood ; he vaulted over this, and partly carrying, partly dragging, the sack and the other things, he made his way through the brushwood until he reached a comparatively open space. There he paused, and after divesting himself of his coat, and turning up his shirt-sleeves, he took his tools and began to dig. The sod was by no means hard, so that a deep hole was soon made ; then Christopher took the portmanteau and bag and put them in the grave he had dug, covering them immediately with earth. The hole was soon filled up, the moss replaced, and the surface quite as even as it was prior to operations. He smiled to himself as he got into his coat and thrust the tools into the sack. Armed with the package, he hastily returned to the cart, and, fully alive to the fact that were he to reappear at his house after such a short absence his servants might consider it was uncommonly strange, and comment upon his movements in a tiresome manner, and thinking, indeed, that their suspicions might well be aroused by their master's deviation from truth, because he could not possibly go and come from the station so rapidly, he felt compelled to drive out of his gates and for some distance down the country road before he dared to turn his horse's head homewards.

When he once more reached his hall door, it was dark ; evening had come on apace as he drove back, and now the jewelled twinkling stars were beginning to peep out one by one. Gulliver came to take the horse and trap round to the stables. His rustic brain was not in any way troubled about his master's proceedings ; he saw that Christopher lifted out something that was tied up in a sack, but he supposed it to be some article sent by rail, brought from the station, and thought nothing more about it. When he had acquainted the housekeeper with Mr. Puckle's departure, she only said :

‘ A good job, too ! a precious good riddance ! Right glad I am, Gulliver. A real stingy, mean cur, I calls him. Never so much as give me a sixpence ; and now to think as he should take hisself off like that, without a-giving of me nothink ! Why, he did ought to have forked out ten shillings at the leastest, and half a crown for you. I never heard tell of the like ! Oh my—oh !’ And so she grumbled away to herself while she mixed an extra stiff tumbler of grog, to fortify her nerves and cure her disappointment at having received no tip.

Once at home, Christopher picked up the large sack and a cord, which he had stowed away for the nonce under the stairs, where he

had also put the shovel and pickaxe, and, lighting a candle, made his way to the temple of Lucifer. His knees shook under him as he turned the key in the lock of the red room, and he felt sick with dread of what he must see and do. He said to himself that he must brace himself up: the hateful business had to be got through; it was useless to endeavour to shirk it, unless he desired to risk his worldly reputation, and possibly his life.

He communed thus with himself, and shivered—already he seemed to feel the hangman's rope tightening round his neck. All these horrid, disquieting thoughts passed rapidly through his mind; then his strong will came to the front and impelled him to action. Without hesitating longer, he marched up to the altar, and averting his gaze as much as he could from the awful thing that lay there, he took hold of it, and bundled it into the sack. Then he got the cord and fastened it securely, tying it also round the middle of the sack, so that he could drag it along—to carry it would have been impossible, the fearful thing was so heavy. Christopher, with a sensation of affright and disgusted horror, that made him positively ill, and almost caused his hair to stand on end, half pulled, half carried, the corpse across the

apartments, and out on the landing. Then it had to be brought down the stairs. He gazed furtively around ; he listened. No, neither housekeeper nor boy was near ; they would probably be tucked up comfortably in their beds by now. The moon looked in coldly through the casement, and in the silvery night Christopher's countenance appeared livid indeed. With a groan, he commenced to pull his burden slowly and laboriously down : bump, bump, bump, it went all down the steps. How horrible !

Christopher paused at the bottom of the stairs to take breath and to collect himself. He really almost imagined that he was a murderer, a stealthy assassin by night ; he felt as if he might have been such. Never, never in all his life had he been so wretched, so overwhelmed with ghastly apprehension ; his flesh was creeping. He stopped to listen again. There was not a sound—silence reigned—the stillness of death was in the air. He hurriedly left his burden for a second, and went on tiptoe to fetch his package of tools ; then, armed with them, and dragging the thing, he opened the garden door, and passed out into the night—a night so glorious that at any other time its mystic beauty might have wakened aspiration and sweet longing in his soul, by the foretaste

of Paradise which the lovely pure gleaming scene brought with it ; but his spirit's senses were closed to that wondrous splendour of restfulness, where all seemed peace and immateriality, and the earth transformed and raised far, far above sordid deeds or wrong thoughts. As noiselessly as possible Christopher pulled his load over the gravel path and on to the grass. He trembled when he heard the slightest scraping noise that it made behind him on the walk, and was thankful to get it upon the mossy turf.

On and on he went, making his way, as previously, to the wood, till he arrived at a spot which forcibly reminded him of a magic circle appertaining to fairies or elves. The forest trees which surrounded it were even loftier than their fellows, and their foliage even thicker. Here Christopher came to a standstill ; his back and shoulders ached, for he was unaccustomed to bearing such heavy implements ; the muscles of his legs, too, felt quite strained, from the exertion of walking whilst drawing a weight behind him, like a beast of burden. But he only permitted himself a very brief repose. He stretched out his limbs to ease them, and taking off his coat, rolling up his shirt-sleeves for the second time to the elbow, like a navvy,

he began to dig another grave. The perspiration trickled down Christopher's face before he had finished, and when he considered that the hole was sufficiently deep—and, in truth, it was almost like a small well by then—he paused a moment. In the next he had dragged the fearful thing to the edge of the cavity, and pushed it in just as it was. It fell down, and Christopher, with lowered eyelids, in order to hide it from view, shovelled in the earth as quickly as he could. Soon the grave was filled, the mossy sod flattened on top, and the gruesome self-imposed task was accomplished. Without further delay, without so much as one fleeting glance, he replaced his implements in the sack, and strode back to the house. Before entering he slunk round to the tool-shed, and there deposited his burden; then as softly as a cat he went in by the garden door and crept up to his room. Christopher undressed as speedily as possible, and with a sigh of relief, to think that his hateful work was done, and too worn out with physical fatigue, as well as with alarming conflicting thoughts, to be able to use his brain any further, he sprang into bed, and, turning over, fell asleep.

CHAPTER XI.

PETER.

At length arrived the day which brought Lord Kenamere to Snatchels. Lady Everilda was too excited to think of her ailments, or even of the state of her complexion. She interviewed the cook for at least three-quarters of an hour on the auspicious morning, and nearly drove that worthy frantic by the erratic manner in which she ordered and counter-ordered various dishes which she wished or did not wish to appear for dinner; indeed, that repast was to be of a singularly elaborate description — rather too elaborate to please Mrs. Cooky, whose heart, to use a vulgar expression, sank into her shoes at the bare idea of having to prepare and concoct entrées and elegant sweets from cookery-book receipts, when never in her life before had she been asked to undertake their fabrication. The lady was, in fact, what is termed a 'plain cook,' and her mistress was determined that she must change into a *cordon bleu* whilst Lord Kenamere sojourned under that hospitable roof.

'I don't much hold with cookery-books, my lady,' ventured the domestic at last, after at

least two dozen different receipts had been brought under her notice and carefully expounded to her.

‘What do you mean, Evans?’ quoth my lady, slightly elevating her eyebrows, and regarding the cook with rather an amazed expression of countenance.

‘Oh, I beg your pardon, my lady!’—this with great humility—‘but them receipts is that muddled up, that to my mind they are like Hebrew: I *reely* cannot comprehend them—and if you please, my lady’—very deferentially—‘have you quite decided as to whether it is to be the chicken cream, the sauté, or the mayonnaise? Also whether you would prefer ice pudding, maraschino jelly, or them new things as you was speaking of?’

‘I will consider, Evans; by the way, I forgot to mention that lately you never seem to have any soup left over from dinner—what becomes of it, pray?’

The cook hesitated for a moment, and then said apologetically: ‘If you please, my lady, Miss Keane is so fond of a drop of soup that I sometimes lets her have it for supper in the room. Now, I myself never so much as touch it; soup don’t seem for to agree with me—I beg your pardon, my lady, for alluding to my health.’

Her ladyship passed the cook's excuse over in grim silence; she was not altogether satisfied as to the truth of the statement, and, being very near and particular in household matters, decided inwardly that she would ask the maid if she really had the soup; for she trusted more in the abigail's veracity than in that of the other functionary. She rather grudged the soup, but still meant to allow Keane to have it, if indeed it was given her, which she doubted.

Just then Iris entered.

'What is it, Iris?' inquired the aunt querulously. 'I can't be disturbed at present; I am so dreadfully busy. Be thankful that you have not the cares of housekeeping yet on your shoulders. But what *do* you want?'—as the girl appeared to be searching on the writing-table for some lost article. 'You are for ever losing your things,' she added crossly.

'It was the time-table I was looking for, Aunt Everilda,' responded Iris gently. 'You remember you told me to find out by which train Lord Kenamere would arrive, so as to send to meet him, as you had mislaid his telegram.'

'But that was at least an hour ago. I found it since then, and gave the order. Peter will be here at about half-past three. Now I must

really beg you to leave me, Iris ; you see how you are wasting Evans' time.'

Lady Everilda's tone was anything but dulcet, as with spiteful velocity she turned over the pages of her last brand-new cookery-book.

Iris was glad to be out of the apartment ; she well knew that her aunt would brook neither disturbance nor interference when engaged in the mysterious rites of household management, and to-day her temper was shorter than it usually was at that important hour. The young girl herself was not in the least excited at Lord Kenamere's prospective advent ; she thought about it perfectly calmly. The idea of his intended visit was pleasing, because it would make a certain variety in her somewhat humdrum existence, and a little fresh element would be rather agreeable than otherwise.

Lady Everilda was attired in an afternoon visiting gown for luncheon, and affected to be much shocked because Iris still wore a simple butcher's blue cotton frock, with an immaculately white embroidered collar, and the little dainty pink satin ribbon of which she was so fond coquettishly tied round her beautifully-moulded throat.

' Really, Iris, you might put on a suitable dress—when you are aware how Lord Ken-

amere has been first doing the London season, and afterwards stopping with that modish Mrs. Percy Fitz-Calien; he is so accustomed to the greatest smartness, and will think you a regular countrified dowdy.'

'But, aunt,' returned the girl, blushing slightly at being thus disparaged, as she looked down at her skirt—in so doing pointing out the tip of a dear little patent-leather shoe—'my frock is quite clean. Of course, I know it is not my best one; then, you see, if I take to wearing that every day, it will soon not be best any more.' She laughed prettily, then pursued: 'You know, Aunt Everilda, that all my frocks are on about an equality, with the exception of that grass lawn. I thought this was as good as the rest.'

'Well, I only know that you sadly require good dressing, to my mind,' replied the other tartly. 'Your figure is your best point; you have got your complexion so terribly, so disastrously, sunburnt, that, really, I am sure I hardly know what colour would suit you; anyhow, the shade of that gown is most unbecoming to you; and your hair, my dear Iris, is *so* badly done!' In truth, it was beautifully and artistically arranged, but too fluffy to win the aunt's favour.

‘ I am sorry, aunt ; but, indeed, I thought my hair was particularly well done to-day.’ The girl’s tone was rather woeful, and she was decidedly vexed and hurt by the lady’s not too charmingly amiable remarks, which on further thought, however, she ascribed to liver and ill-humour.

‘ If you want your hair so loose round your forehead, you should wear a fringe ; your arrangement is mad and tasteless. It really annoys me to see you such a guy. It reflects so badly upon me, too ; I shall bear the blame of it all.’

Poor Lady Everilda ! her own taste was very poor, and had Iris conformed to it, her charms would have sadly suffered thereby. Left to herself, she dressed exactly to suit her own style, and, fortunately, whenever her aunt advised, she felt neither power nor inclination to follow her precepts in this matter. Lady Everilda was just now decidedly irritable and cantankerous, but at the same time it must be laid to her credit that she was anxious that her niece should appear at her very best in Lord Kenamere’s critical eyes.

Iris had a small will of her own. She was slightly nettled too, by so much disparagement ; a spirit of contrariety came upon her, a kind of

reckless daring—a very harmless and babyish sort, but there nevertheless—and she made up her mind to retain both gown and coiffure, and let Lord Kenamere think whatever he liked of her appearance.

‘What do I care, I should like to know!’ she mused, half defiantly. ‘Does Aunt Everilda want me to lay myself out to please him? Then I *won’t*.’ Here she stamped her little foot. ‘He is a pleasant young man enough, and an old friend; but be thrown at his head I will *not*. I care nothing for him, and I am very sure he wouldn’t care about me, after having seen all those charming, fascinating, beautiful women and girls. I thought at first that it was simply poor Aunt Everilda’s ill-humour, but later it dawned upon me that she said all she did partly out of kindness. What a mistaken kindness, to be sure! I never feel certain, either, if aunt’s taste is correct. I think she wants everything arranged in geometrical figures, and she prefers half-tints to real genuine shades of colour. Then, she thinks that the one object in life to a girl should be a good settlement—a brilliant marriage. Now, in that I disagree with her entirely. I even sometimes fancy that it is wiser to remain single. The unmarried woman is mistress of herself; she has no person belonging

to her whom she is compelled to consult ; she can go her own way and have her own interests—and then how rich and full may existence become ! There are so many things to see, so much to do. A wife and mother really seldom has leisure to study art, literature, music, or science, at all. The idea of maternity alarms me, too—what suffering the entrance into the world of a tiny mortal causes ! Then, one might have five or more children—who knows ? I don't dislike babies—I pity them, as I do all small creatures ; but the responsibility of a life to direct is overpowering—and if it came to several ? Then, how to educate the boys and girls ? I am (I suppose) conscientious, and should never feel certain if I was bringing them up rightly, or inculcating pure truth into those tiny souls. Of course, I would do my best ; but my best might possibly be very far removed from perfection—very bad, in fact, just by reason of my ignorance. For, pray, who is there on whom I can rely for good advice ? Certainly not upon poor dear Aunt Everilda. And I am motherless. As for aunt, I often feel sorry for her ; for it is easy to see that hers is a disappointed life. No doubt she had a lover, who was drowned or proved untrue. I wonder, now, what it is like to have a real

lover—somebody who is very, very fond of one ; someone, for instance, who would put me on a pinnacle and adore me. Yes, I think all that part—the first part—would really be extremely nice ; but it is the sequel I am not so sure of. And when I come to consider the matter, perhaps—well, perhaps it is not very conceited of me to feel rather certain that one or two young men have set me on a pinnacle : if I hadn't laughed at them at the outset, I *believe*—I may say, I am *sure*—they would have proposed ; but, then, what dreadful specimens they were ! I suppose I am difficult to please, and find it impossible to fall in love ; because I remember that some other girls were so civil, to say the least of it, to those same youths, that I was quite astonished ! Now I think of it, I am half inclined to imagine that that extraordinary Mr. Christopher Perkyns was beginning to make himself ridiculous : he made me grow angry, for he seemed downright impertinent, paying me such open compliments ; he offended my taste, somehow. I dare say I am absurdly sensitive ; but really, really that man doesn't appear to be a gentleman. On one thing I am determined : Aunt Everilda shall discover that I do not intend to fall in with her calculating plans ; and Lord Kenamere will find

that my manner has become singularly frigid, and that I have grown rather haughty, unconversational, and altogether distant.'

And having arrived at this conclusion, Iris put on her hat and went for a stroll with her dog, in order that the coming guest should only find the older lady waiting to receive him.

It was not quite so hot this afternoon, and the girl, who since the memorable day when she had been forced to take refuge at Screeling had taken a dislike both to the house and grounds, bent her steps in the opposite direction, towards the open country. She walked as far as she dared, for Lady Everilda now strongly objected to prolonged absences where her niece was concerned, so Iris was presently reluctantly constrained to return homewards. Her path was a winding grassy lane between two hedgerows. She turned a corner, and almost fell into the arms of Lord Kenamere. It seemed to be Iris's curiously strange fate to encounter persons of the opposite sex in an embarrassing fashion.

'Oh, how do you do?' she said under her breath, and although she essayed her utmost to prevent herself from blushing, her efforts were futile; she was of the blushing sort, and

the warm red colour mounted as usual to her cheeks.

Lord Kenamere smiled as he doffed his hat, and a rather amused expression lurked beneath the admiration which shone so palpably out of his honest blue eyes. He thought how sweet and fresh she looked as he took her hand. The butcher-blue gown, the rich tangle of her soft fine hair, were to his idea charming—the one as a frame, the other as a crown, to her bewitching maidenly beauty. He was quite ensnared, enchanted. So his notions greatly differed from those of Lady Everilda Dacre.

‘What a lucky chance now! I am glad I came this way! And what a jolly little pug, to be sure!’ he said.

Iris ignored the first part of his sentence, and vouchsafed but a coldly distant answer to its termination. She was, however, scarcely proof against flattery where her pet was concerned. She smiled inwardly.

‘Yes; everyone says so. Zulu is a universal favourite,’ she replied as she walked on, the young man by her side.

‘I came out because I felt sure Lady Everilda ought to indulge in an afternoon siesta. I recollect of old that it always did her good. I was so delighted to come. So kind of her to

ask me down! Real good sort she is. But, Miss Amering, I *am* so glad to be here!

And he looked down at Iris to endeavour to read if she was perhaps just a little bit pleased that he had come. But the girl did not smile. She surveyed him with a glance of cool composure.

'It isn't a bad place, this. The country is decidedly pretty,' she returned. Then she talked to her dog.

'It is quite lovely here; and I only hope you won't mind letting me accompany you in your strolls, for, really, I don't know my way about without a cicerone. Those woods yonder, now'—and he pointed in their direction—'I am sure one might easily lose one's self in them.'

His heart beat fast; he felt she was for him the one woman in the universe, his soul's true mate.

'It would be perfectly impossible to lose your way.' Iris's tone was half scoffing. 'The paths run straight through and straight back, so that, unless you left them purposely, you couldn't help arriving somewhere; and even if you did, you would soon reach another track that would bring you back by a circular route, unless—unless you chose to walk into the mere.'

This was a sudden idea of hers, and she blurted the words out, forcing herself literally to utter them, although she knew she was unkind and uncourteous ; whilst she was at the same time sensible of a latent feeling of remorse, for the very fact of desiring to dislike this unfortunate, inoffensive young man, and the determination to be as disagreeably distant as possible to him, seemed to make her heart feel kinder—a heart that was naturally gentle and good. Her companion gave her a reproachful look.

‘ And so I might easily walk into the mere,’ he said quickly ; but there was a tremor in his voice, which she observed. ‘ Don’t you mind, then, in the least if your friends are drowned?’ he inquired as he gazed at her searchingly.

Iris was slightly taken aback, both by the remark and its tone. Peter’s voice was sympathetic and penetrating. She hesitated before speaking ; then she answered rather soberly, and with lowered eyelids, but parrying the awkward question as skilfully as she could :

‘ I only mentioned the water because the brink is so overgrown with reeds and rushes, the undergrowth being so thick, besides, in those woods, that if one happened to stray off

the path one might come upon the mere unawares, and——'

'And fall in?' interrupted Peter, smiling mischievously. 'I quite understand. Your timely warning was most thoughtful, Miss Amering. By the way,' he pursued, 'my name being Kenamere, I personally ought to have some attraction for the mere, or *vice-versâ*. What think you?'

He laughed a trifle uneasily, in a half-hearted way. He was enthralled, fascinated, by this girl, and he was bitterly hurt at her entire and complete coldness, her unfriendliness of speech and manner. She treated him as if he were some utter stranger, and one even that she much disliked. He was wounded and piqued beyond measure, yet more than ever determined to win her affections, never mind what obstacles he would have to surmount in so doing.

If Iris had been the most artful, finished coquette, the most arrant flirt in the world, she could not have played her cards better. Had she desired to enslave Peter and catch him in her silken toils, making him irretrievably her own, she could not have chosen a more prudent line of conduct. Men are by nature pursuers, given to the chase, and the more difficult

appears the capture, the more hotly do they rush after their prey.

The pair were nearing the house. Peter tried his uttermost to make himself agreeable, but it was useless. The damsel was adamant, and plainly manifested to him that he had thrust his company upon her unbidden, and that for choice she would infinitely prefer to be alone.

It was very galling to the young man to find himself so decidedly snubbed, treated as if he were a mere cipher—he on whom all the fashionable girls in the London ballrooms had smiled as if he had been a god. He was by no means conceited, but he had both eyes and ears, and he had noticed that some of his fellows were not so blessed. They had been passed over with scorn, whilst dances were carefully reserved for him. Scant remarks and replies in monosyllables had been the conversation doled out to these less fortunate males from rosy lips which knew how to chatter to him, till he wondered if the owners were magpies or sensible young women; for the rubbish to which he had to listen occasionally bored him so that he was thankful to return the charges to their patient chaperons. One or two of the more pronounced and reckless among the fair butterflies, eager to enter the bonds of

matrimony, wild to possess a coronet, and a by-no-means-to-be-despised fortune with it, had actually almost or quite proposed to him. Had they been in love with him, he could easily have forgiven their boldness; but he was so wholly aware that the regard and attachment were not directed towards him personally that he was simply sickened. He had been so disgustingly run after during his short sojourn in the Metropolis that he found Iris and her novel mode of proceeding too quaint, refreshing, and invigorating for words. This new régime seemed to brace him up like a cold bath, and although somewhat shivery and at the same time startling, it was extremely tonical, and stimulated him to further action.

Lady Everilda was sharp enough to observe that her niece's brow was clouded when she entered the room, followed by Peter. She saw, too, that the girl drank tea in almost complete silence, and that she replied laconically when the young man addressed her. The aunt did not feel pleased, and she was still less so when Iris left the apartment, and never returned at all till she came down dressed for dinner in her every-evening frock. Not an extra ribbon, not a flower or necklace, did she wear. Lady Everilda was furious. She herself wore her

best dove-coloured satin trimmed with old Venetian point lace, whilst long pear-drop pearl earrings adorned her ears, and a fine row of pearls clasped her withered throat.

At dinner Lord Kenamere and the older lady enjoyed a *tête-à-tête*, for Iris scarcely said a word. Later, in the drawing-room, it was much the same; and when asked to sing, she pleaded fatigue, and, opening the French windows, strolled out into the garden with her pug. Peter knew better than to follow her, although her ladyship threw out several thinly-veiled hints that he might do so if he chose.

‘Wouldn’t you like a cigar, Peter? Now, I am sure you would, only I fear I dare not tell you to smoke in here, because the odour makes me feel faint. But it is a fine night; you might saunter round the garden.’

Peter said he felt not the slightest inclination for a weed. Then Lady Everilda actually rose, and, begging him to excuse her, said she must find a letter she thought she had mislaid amongst some papers at the further end of the room. Lord Kenamere rose, too, but pretended to be much interested in examining the pictures and china, till the lady felt bound to return, whilst fuming inwardly at the failure of her clever little scheme.

Presently Iris came in, but only when it was time to retire. Then Lady Everilda followed her niece into her room, and told her she was quite ashamed of her rudeness, and felt positive that Lord Kenamere thought her not only the most dowdy and badly-dressed, but the worst-mannered, most ill-tempered girl he had ever seen.

Iris responded that she didn't believe Lord Kenamere troubled his head about her at all, and that, if her conduct was strange, it was not her own fault, but her aunt's, for so clearly letting her know that she was to attempt to attract the young man, and that, as she herself strongly objected to such ideas, she felt bound to show him that she had no notion or wish to do so.

'Besides,' she added, 'I cannot and will not be paraded like some prize pony at a show. When I think of it, I feel nervous and ill.'

'Pray don't imagine yourself a "prize,"' returned the aunt angrily and curtly. 'You are just an ordinary young woman, and a very obstinate one, too. Yes, Iris,' she continued, as the girl stood staring at her mutely, her brain aflame with worrying, exciting thoughts, her heart beating fast with conflicting emotions, 'you may well maintain silence. I do all I

can for you, and my reward is ingratitude ; and I must tell you again that you look almost plain. That sullen mood does not suit you.'

She flounced out of the room, and Iris, who had doubtless behaved in a rather curious manner, closed and locked the door, and with a great sob threw herself upon her bed in an agony of weeping.

Poor child ! She seemed unable to comprehend herself. She had been acting a part which did not come naturally to her. She knew that she had been ungracious and rude. She was so young, so innocent and inexperienced, and she was hitherto unacquainted with any real heart-breaking grief. Therefore this trivial sorrow, for which she had chiefly herself to thank, assumed a stupendous magnitude, out of all proportion to its real origin and character. Iris hardly knew why she wept. She was sad and troubled ; she was angry with her aunt, but the anger was mixed with some remorse at having appeared ungrateful. She was exasperated altogether : cross with herself, yet pitying herself, and at the same time feeling that she must continue in the perverse path she had chosen.

And what about Lord Kenamere ? The girl could not analyze her feelings towards him at

all. She fancied she hated him for being the cause of her misery ; but her soul was melted in compassion for him also, because he had looked at her with such reproachful eyes, and he had been so good and kind after she had treated him so horribly.

By-and-by the child could think no more ; she became worn out. The tears ceased, and quickly undressing, as if in a semi-dreaming condition, she laid her pretty head on the pillow and slumbered.

CHAPTER XII.

MATED SOULS.

As the days wore on, Christopher's secret became more and more unbearable ; he lived in constant dread of discovery. Yet everyone had quietly and unquestioningly accepted his version of the ex-priest's disappearance.

Edmund never received anything through the post, excepting an occasional note from the charmers at Kingsford, or an unpaid bill. Any relatives he might formerly have possessed were dead and gone, so there was not a creature in the world who cared if he lived or died. So

far, then, Christopher's safety was absolute ; but his own spirit was restless, and he still felt as if he had committed a crime. To everything which concerned the worship of Lucifer he had taken an intense hatred ; all connected with it filled him with shuddering repugnance. With his own hands he tore down the sable trappings, demolished the fearful altar, and obliterated the painted skull and cross-bones. This done, he ordered in decorators, and had the walls of both apartments papered in light, cheerful colours, and the rooms comfortably furnished.

The transformation was not undertaken without the thoughts of the Master of Screeling Grange reverting to Iris ; although the tragedy of the ex-priest's untimely demise had banished her temporarily from his mind, after a very short period she resumed possession of heart and brain. He was longing, longing to see her again, but yet he had not the courage to present himself at Lady Everilda's, either on the Sunday immediately after he conducted Iris back from Screeling or on the following Sunday. A certain shyness and diffidence, a fear of not being well received by Miss Amering, prevented his feet from walking in the direction whither his heart had flown. Besides,

some potent horrid influence, some ghastly dread, forced him to wend his steps daily in the direction of Edmund's grave, and to linger by it in abject terror for awhile. Thus wretchedly did the man pass his time.

And how about the object of his affections?

Almost a week had gone by since Lord Kenamere arrived at Snatchels, and, although he ardently desired Iris's company, she had hitherto managed to avoid him. Excepting at meals or in the presence of her aunt, during all those long days she had not spoken to him; never once had she walked a hundred yards with him alone; she waited till he was well out of the house and grounds before she ventured to take a stroll, and so afraid was she of meeting the young man, that, instead of enjoying her usual constitutionals, she confined herself to mild exercise round the garden.

Peter had been bold enough to ask Iris, point-blank, if she would come for a turn; but she excused herself by saying she regretted she had some urgent correspondence to attend to, and her manner was so chilling that for the moment his heart sank; and he left her, feeling as gloomily mad as baffled lovers will. Peter was no fool; he was sharp enough to read the girl's true nature, and he

perceived and knew that, even if his friendship were distasteful, for some occult reason she was behaving for his benefit, in a fashion that was totally against the grain and foreign to her, for he had made no real advance ; therefore, why was she offended ? He saw how kind was her real disposition ; he noted the interest she manifested in the poor cottagers, and in the animals on the estate ; little delightful traits of character would peep out in spite of herself, when she fancied he was not listening. Many an aside whispered to Lady Everilda did he overhear, about soup or wine which was to be sent to some poor widow or destitute invalid. She was uncommonly distant and silent generally, certainly ; but sometimes she would forget, and talk prettily, and with her face dimpled in smiles she looked passing sweet.

Each succeeding day, each hour, did Peter's love wax stronger, till finally he felt that, if this mighty, unquenchable soul affection must needs be pent up much longer in his breast, it would destroy him : he must speak or die. Lovers are ever prone to exaggerate their sentiments, for they exist in magic gardens ; blissful mortals are they for awhile, sun-crowned indeed if their blossoming amaranthine flowers bloom in everlasting sweetness, and change not to sad, melan-

choly asphodels. Peter, goaded to frenzy by the damsel's coldness and by her continued evasion of him, resolved to endeavour to take her by storm. The waiting game he could no longer play. He even thought he had remained too long in a condition of neutrality. The little lady fancied he was not aware how she stayed concealed in some corner of the house till, knowing him to be well and safely away, she emerged from her hiding-place like a tiny mouse to take some air. But she was out in her reckoning. She did not give the young man credit for the acuteness and wisdom which he possessed; she did not allow for his watchful observation. Love sharpened his wits, and caused him to notice her every movement—yea, and to guess the prompting motives.

It happened, then, that on a certain Sunday afternoon Lord Kenamere went out, but that he did not wander far—only, indeed, to the end of the garden, and through a gate, when he ensconced himself slyly behind a privet hedge. He could from thence command a perfect view of the house, although he was absolutely invisible to any person who entered or quitted the mansion.

Peter had not to wait long. In a few moments there appeared at the side-door—

which was well within his range of vision—a neat little figure clad in a pink shirt and a blue serge skirt. She wore no hat, but carried an elegant parasol in blue and white striped silk, tied at the handle with a rose-coloured satin bow. Onwards she came, gliding along in her graceful way, queen-like in her erect carriage, followed by her faithful pug, which trotted at her heels sedately and solemnly. She passed within a few yards of Peter, who devoured her with his eyes. He had now sunk down upon his knees, in order to hide himself completely, and he gazed at her through a small gap. When her back was well turned, he rose, and, still keeping in ambush, saw how she entered an arbour to which the path she had chosen led. This arbour was not one of those dark wooden spider-traps, where lurking unpleasant insects may alight upon the nose of the unwary intruder, or crawl down on his neck inside his collar. No; the dainty summer-house which sheltered the dainty maiden from the too ardent rays of the sun was composed entirely of wire, over which trailed a perfect network of creepers. The whole was a mass—a bower of roses, clematis, and honeysuckle; white magnolias and eucharis lilies also grew around in profusion, their stems resting lovingly

against the firm supporting structure, their heads mingling caressingly with the other flowers, although, by reason of their immaculate frail pure whiteness, they almost put these to shame.

With the virile determination that gave colour to his turbulent, vehement emotions, and calmed them, Peter forsook his ambushade, and walked leisurely towards the arbour. Iris started and blushed slightly when she beheld him standing at the entrance; from her seat his gradual approach was hidden, so that he burst upon her like a meteor.

‘What a deliciously cool retreat, Miss Amering!’ he said. ‘I fear I am disturbing you, and I apologize for thus breaking in upon your solitude—the solitude that I am aware you love.’ He paused, chivalrous to a degree.

‘I don’t understand you, Lord Kenamere; I see no reason for apologies,’ returned Iris rather at random: for she was taken aback, and, feeling that the cap fitted, hardly knew what to say on the spur of the moment.

‘May I come in and rest awhile also? It is so broiling hot this afternoon,’ he said.

She nodded a cold assent, but maintained silence. Then he entered, and placed himself at a little distance from her.

‘Now or never,’ he thought. ‘Why do you

dislike me so ?' he asked ; then continued with rapid speech : ' How have I had the misfortune to offend you ? What—what have I done that you who were formerly so friendly, should now constantly avoid me, should treat me as if I were some loathsome thing ?'

Iris had averted her face. She was bending forward and looking down on the ground ; her fingers were playing nervously with the elegant stone knob of her parasol.

' I—I——' she began, then ceased. There was a curious, novel thrill at her heart ; she quivered like an aspen leaf.

' Yes,' went on Peter, ' if you only knew how you have grieved me—— No, listen, I beseech you '—as she rose to her feet and made as if she fain would leave him. He rose also immediately. ' Miss Amering—Iris—I must speak,' he said. ' I must tell you how dear you are to me, how I adore you ! Ah, don't shrink from me !'—as with a swift movement she turned her shoulder, so that her back was almost towards him, and a temptingly-pretty, shell-like, wild-rose-tinted ear.

' Why do you say all this ? Oh, stop !' she whispered, without even glancing at him. Her voice was tremulous ; there was nearly a sob in it.

‘Iris, sweet,’ he pleaded earnestly, ‘you do not realize what you are to me. This great affection for you is no new thing, although in honesty I must tell you that only lately has it dawned sharply and clearly upon me that I cannot live without you; but, in truth, I have always been fond of you. Iris, be my wife!’

And, growing bolder, and in the eagerness of his passion, he possessed himself of her left hand, which was nearest him. But although touched, although as a bright flash the fact that her heart had gone out to this young man without recall was thrust upon her consciousness, she could not speak. The sudden amazement of it all, and the remorse which bowed down her spirit for her cruel conduct towards him, sealed up her lips. Still, she did not draw her fingers away, and this gave the wooer hope.

‘Say you will!’ he went on. ‘Do not refuse me!’—as she averted her sweet face even more. ‘I will be your devoted slave, Iris, all my life long. I shall live just for you and your happiness. Do you think I don’t know your character intimately? Can’t I tell that you are as good as gold? My child, I love you for your true self, believe me. Give me a grain of comfort. Say that you don’t hate me; that you like me just a little bit—not quite as much as

your pug'—here he threw her a whimsical look—'but, still, that will suffice. Dearest'—and his voice trembled with intense feeling—'leave the rest to me, for I know—nay, I am sure—that later I can make you care for me! Iris, beloved!'

The last term of endearment broke from Peter's lips in a great cry of tender triumph; for having delivered himself of this torrent of rapturous words, which came straight from his true, manly soul, and having already fancied that the maid was relenting, he knew it for a certainty now. For she turned her head and lifted those gazelle-like eyes for an instant to his; they were misty and full of tears. Then, stooping, he kissed her on the lips. She crimsoned to the roots of her hair, but her head sank down on his shoulder.

'Speak, then, dear,' he said, as she closed her eyes and sighed happily, as he placed his arm tenderly around her lissom waist.

Then she murmured:

'I am so regretful for all my unkindness. I did not know that I cared——'

'Peter,' he whispered, interrupting her.

'Peter,' she echoed in her flute-like voice, and with an angelic smile.

He pressed his lips upon her wavy hair; then she extricated herself from his embrace.

He drew her arm through his, and passed with her towards the house.

So absorbed were the two with each other that they did not notice that they were observed. On two garden-chairs on the lawn, close to the drawing-room windows, were seated Lady Everilda and Mr. Christopher Perkyns. Christopher had at last plucked up sufficient courage to call. Just now he fervently wished himself back in the heart of South Africa, for what he beheld he would gladly have shut out from his view. He was unable to tear his eyes from the couple who, all unconscious that four keen, staring eyes were closely regarding them, scanning their every glance and gesture, advanced leisurely forward. Christopher understood the situation at once. He discerned the unmistakable light of true, gladsome love illuminating those youthful countenances, and a sickening sense of failure, a demon of jealousy, took possession of his soul. He gnashed his teeth with rage at being compelled to witness the success of a rival.

Lady Everilda's face was one smile. She turned towards him, and ventured a few casual remarks in a perky tone quite different from her usual acid, languid one. Evidently her thoughts were not with her words, and she

therefore failed to notice the hoarse, growling way in which her companion replied.

Presently Peter and Iris arrived exactly in front of the others, literally at their feet. With a stifled cry, with confusion written all over her face, Iris sprang aside; even Peter coloured, but his presence of mind did not desert him.

‘I must have a word with you presently,’ he said *sotto voce* to Lady Everilda.

But she, far too radiant and excited to restrain herself, heedless altogether of the owner of Screeling’s presence, exclaimed in a loud voice:

‘Peter, I congratulate you, dear boy! My fondest wishes are fulfilled!’

In the meantime, Iris, who had been changing from white to red and back again at least half a dozen times, timidly attempted some conversation with Christopher. But he was unable to utter a word; even the handshake she had given him drove him to frenzy. He was in a ferment; he could not contain himself; a blank despair seemed to have settled upon his mind, and, with a hasty adieu to both ladies, he departed. Fortunately, Lady Everilda was so overcome with felicity, so astounded, too, at such an unaccountable reversal of affairs, that she had omitted to introduce the two men to each other. Had she done so, there might

have been a scene, for Christopher's veneer had fled, and uncontrolled savagery had risen to the surface. He left, and was not missed. Joy reigned, and that evening a gay, glad trio sat round the dining-room table at Snatchels.

* * * * *

And so the wedding-bells pealed out merrily one September morning for Peter and Iris. Let all good wishes follow after that happy bride and bridegroom, for theirs is true wedlock. Each recognises the beauty of the other's spirit, clearly perceiving the noble qualities, and giving due allowance for trivial faults and errors of judgment. Their gaze is not only fixed upon outward, fading things; their mutual understanding is perfect, so that their earthly path, as far as one can see, seems strewn with fair, fragrant roses. Farewell, then, to Lord and Lady Kenamere.

And Christopher Perkyns? How fared he later? Ah, his disappointment was bitter, although, forsooth, he never had the faintest shadow of a reason for supposing that the lovely, charming Miss Amering would smile on such as he. Pray what had he done, either, to deserve the blessing of a pure woman's love? Had he lived so worthily? On account of the secret of Puckle's mysterious death, he continued to reside at Screeling in order to keep

watch. A kind of spell seemed to keep Christopher fixed to the spot : he feared the remains might be found and an accusation of murder brought against him. For several years did that dread, dark secret prey upon his mind, causing him grave anxiety. But no one ever discovered it ; it was for aye retained by him alone, locked safely deep down in his breast.

Christopher saw little of his neighbours, and passed most of his time in solitude. The only other inmates of the old house were Mrs. Simcox and Gulliver for many a long day, excepting the ghosts, who were constant guests, and who visited the Master of Screeling often by night. When quite an elderly man he married the widow of a farmer, and a very suitable match it was. Life is chequered, but the true philosopher will find that the key to happiness is well-doing, and that unselfishness is the road which leads straight through the glistening golden gates. What mortal can attain to perfection ? But to do evil causes naught but despondent misery, and the blissful peace of heaven on earth dwells only in that soul which strives ever upwards towards its highest ideal.



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